JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN

BY LEO EDWARDS

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THE JERRY TODD SERIES

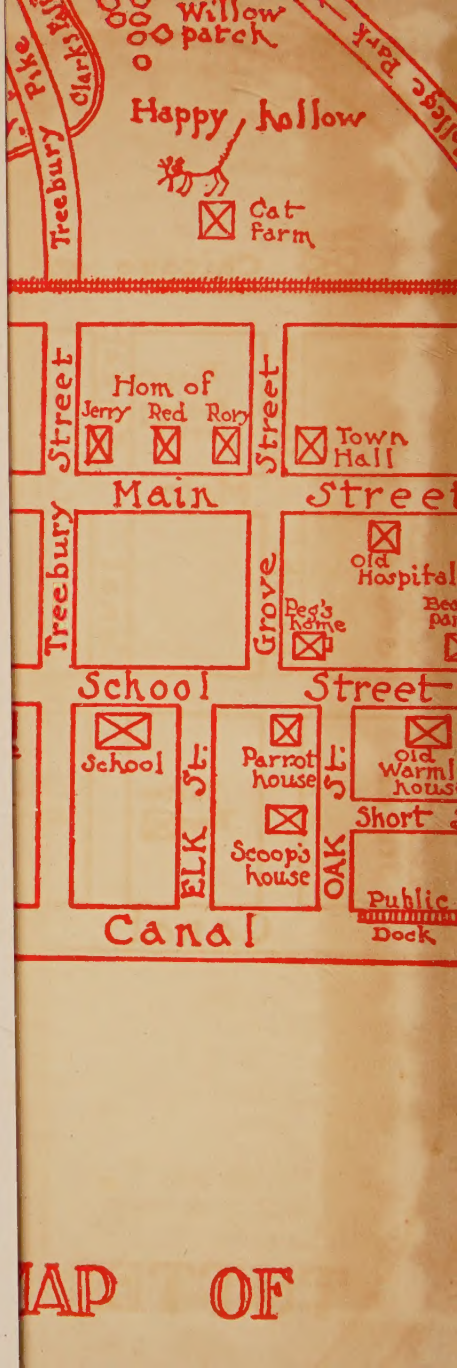
JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN

By LEO EDWARDS

Pat! pat! pat! Footsteps, guarded and stealthy. In the dead of night the four excited boys in Jerry Todd's tent hear the mysterious outside sounds. And they remember queer things! the whispering trunk owned by the yellow-faced traveling Hindu bill-poster; the uncanny yellow cat that appeared when the Hindu died; the frozen horror on the dead man's face.

That strange hen! Why does it waltz? And what is the secret of the prowling peril? A good old scout is Cap'n Boaz Tinkertop, with his hilarious dancing leg. Then, even as the Hindu had earlier died so quickly and mysteriously, the boys' old friend disappears. It is a moment of fearful tragedy to Jerry. Then comes the final ludicrous climax.

A book crammed full of laughs and shivers.



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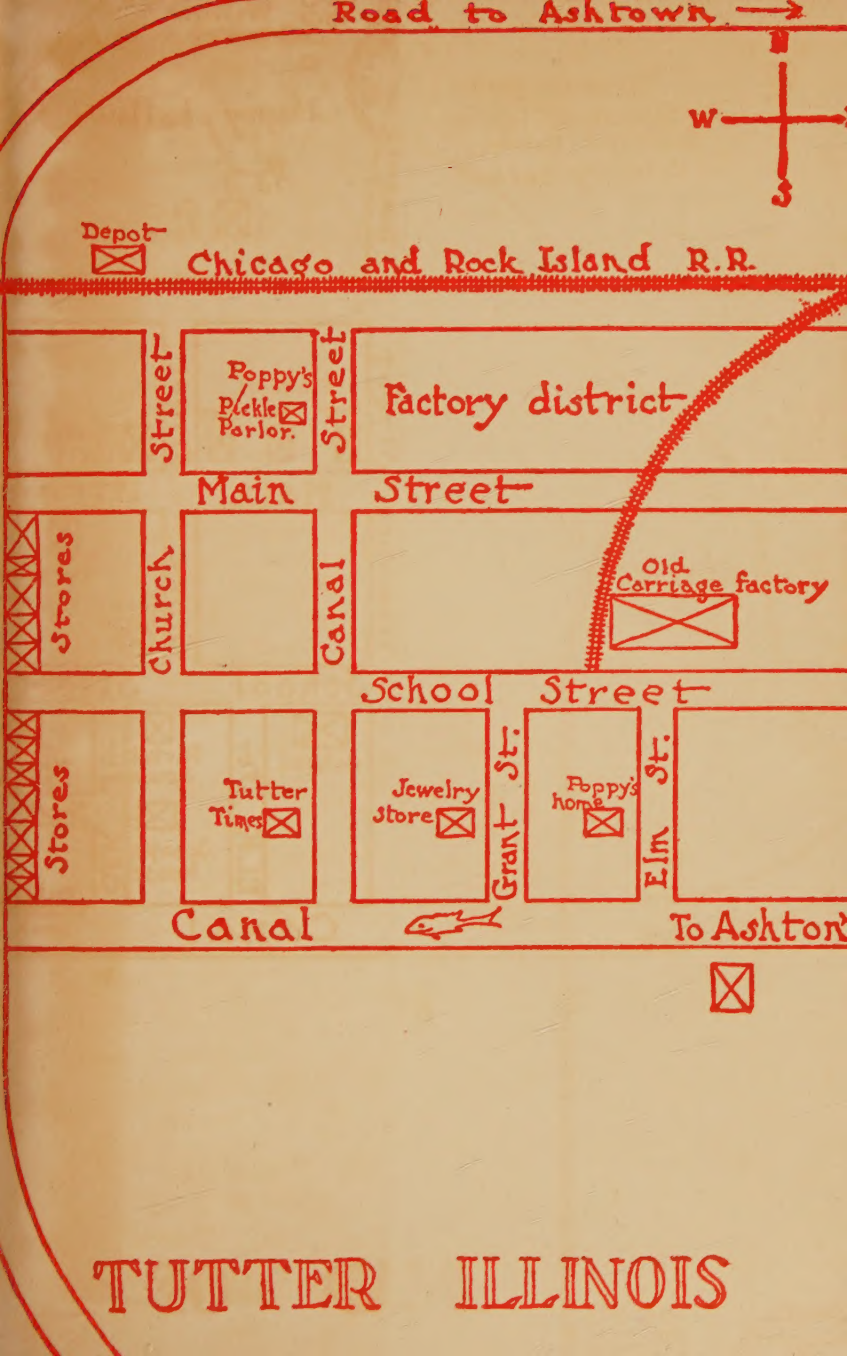

TUTTER ILLINOIS

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JERRY TODD
AND THE WALTZING HEN

"DEY IS SPEE-RITS IN DAT TRUNK—YASSUH!"

Jerry Todd and the Waltzing Hen. *Frontispiece*—(*Page* 15)

JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
B. N. SALG

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JERRY TODD SAYS:

We sure had an exciting time solving the amazing mystery of the prowling peril and the waltzing hen. Remember Cap'n Tinkertop in the "mummy" book? There is a lot about him in this book. There is a strange Hindu, too, a yellow-faced man of mystery, a fat show lady and a stage wizard. Some very surprising things happen, as you will learn.

Peg Shaw told me the other day when we were feeding his pet coon that he liked this book better than any of the other three. His opinion doesn't count for much, however, because when I wrote down the story of Lady Victoria, the rose-colored cat, he said that book was better than the "mummy" book; then when I wrote down about our Oak Island adventures, he said *that* book was the best. I suspect that he likes this book the best because it is the newest. He'll probably brag up my next book in the same loyal way.

If you haven't read my other three books, as mentioned above, you may want to get them and determine for yourself if one story is better than another. The complete titles are:

JERRY TODD AND THE WHISPERING MUMMY (1)

JERRY TODD AND THE ROSE-COLORED CAT (2)

JERRY TODD AND THE OAK ISLAND TREASURE (3)

Did you ever hear of a "puzzle room"? We never did until we became involved in the mystery of the talking frog. Everybody in Tutter said that the old Matson house, where the puzzle maker met his death, was haunted. Suddenly a new family came to town, moving into the lonely brick house. Why did the inventor pick out such a lonely, spooky home? Who was Mr. Posselwait, the queer soap man? You'll laugh when you read about our "assistant beautifier" jobs. And you'll shiver where the ghost takes after me. Mystery, suspense, surprises, fun—all are in my fifth book: JERRY TODD AND THE TALKING FROG.

Your friend,

JERRY TODD.

OUR CHATTER-BOX

OUR Chatter-Box" is a department open to all readers of my books (this is Leo Edwards speaking). The first "Chatter-Box" appeared in my sixteenth book. My mail had grown as the interest in my books had grown. And it was to utilize many of the fine letters that I received from my young readers that I created "Our Chatter-Box"—"Chatter-Box," of course meaning a lot of gab from everybody. The department became an immediate success. A regular feature of all my new books, my publisher asked me, as the letters continued to pour in on me, if I wouldn't prepare brief "Chatter-Boxes" for all of my early books. That, I said, would be fun. And so this book, which originally appeared without a "Chatter-Box," now has one.

If you have written to me, it may be that your letter has been used in the "Chatter-Box" in one of my other books. So always read the "Chatter-Box" first. Boys tell me they feel honored to have their names in print. And boys who have written accepted poems, built around the characters in my books, or featuring some boyish interest, are very proud of the autographed copies that they received as a reward. See the many fine poems in my latest books. Maybe you can do still better. In any event, write me a long interesting letter. For I need a lot of good letters for future "Chatter-Boxes."

LETTERS

I HAVE just read *Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem,*" writes Lester Cook of Chicago, Ill., "and I think your 'Chatter-Box' is much better than a preface. The 'Chatter-Box' is just like a column that is run by ourselves, because all the letters are by us. I like very much the small biography about yourself (in the *Tittering Totem*). I want to be a writer and I am practicing by writing

a continued story for my school paper and for my school literary club."

Bob Moore of Fredericksburg, Va., has illustrated his interesting letter with a picture of himself lending his boy pals his Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books. A real artist, I can see that all right. And here's good luck to you, Bob, if you decide to enter that field in later years.

"Like Jerry Todd," writes Bob, "I have a boy friend living in the country. He is in my classes and on Saturdays I go out there, and during the summer I spend the most of my time there. After school (like Henny Bibbler in the *Bob-Tailed Elephant* book) he often comes home with me."

"In my opinion, one of the greatest values of your Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books," writes Bob Hays of Tulsa, Okla., "is the attractive entrance which they provide for those just entering the book-reading world."

Thanks, Bob. I hadn't thought of my books in that light. But if they are making it easier for boys to become readers, I surely am grateful. For book pals are pals worth having. All boys should read good books.

Among other boys, Gerald O'Neill of Chicago, Ill., has called my attention to the fact that I used the "cork-tree" yarn in both my *Bob-Tailed Elephant* and *Whispering Cave* books. Yep, you're right, Gerald. And here's how it happened: One time I wrote a short story called "Uncle Jonah's Cork Tree." I thought a great deal of the story. And I hoped to find a place for it in one of my books. I did work it into the *Cave* book, though not to the best possible advantage. When I came to write the *Elephant* book the story, just as I had written it, fitted in perfectly. So I thought boys would pardon the repetition. . . . Anyway not all boys read all of my books.

And still another boy—William L. Ripley, Jr., of Wollaston, Mass.—advises that he has named his speed boat "The Tittering Totem."

To much the same point George Wander of Newark, N. J., named his model airplane "Jerry Todd." He further states that he organized a Jerry Todd club, using for a password Jerry's gang's danger cry—thirteen.

"I didn't name my boat 'The Tittering Totem,'" writes Congdon Wood of Cape Cottage, Maine, "but I did give that name to my model airplane."

"I have read all of the Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books," writes Albert Wilson of Montclair, N. J. "I like them very much, because they seem so real. I bet anything you're just like Jerry's dad. My dad is. One time he helped me

put on a show. And when my chums get up a club, or something, he always wants to be in it. I've figured out just where Tutter lies in Illinois. Yet, if Tutter *is* the town I think, why is it that you never have mentioned Starved Rock Park, which is so close by? I have an aunt living in Mundelein, Ill., and one time when I was visiting her we planned to go to Starved Rock on an automobile trip. For I wanted to see the place where, according to my aunt's story, the Indians were starved. But something came up to prevent the trip. I belong to the Methodist Church. But don't think I'm ever going to bust up Sunday School like Jerry did in the *Pedigreed Pickles* book, when he saw the iron thing on the cat's neck. I sure laughed when I read about the tomato fight in the *Tittering Totem* book. It served Bid Stricker right, for he and his gang had no business making up mean poetry about Poppy's swell $4.49 car. Oh, boy! I guess the old lawyer wouldn't have felt so 'Fuzzy' if Mr. Ott and the rest had actually put tar and feathers on him. 'Tweet! Tweet!' That was some name for a motor boat, all right."

Also Al asked me for one of my pictures, telling me that he'd willingly pay any reasonable amount. "I want a picture of you," he writes, "because, like other boys, I think you're a real guy, and know how to write about boys and be interested in them." Well, Al, you can secure a picture of my wonderfully handsome mug by writing to Grosset & Dunlap, 1140 Broadway, New York, N. Y., enclosing ten cents in stamps for handling.

"Thanks," writes Terry Greene of Nelsonville, Ohio, "for telling me about the Trigger Berg books. I got the books right away. And I almost laughed myself sick. I was afraid I would damage my insides. In another 'Chatter-Box' a boy told about a kite release. I tried it but my kite fell into a pond."

"I want to belong to your Freckled Goldfish club," writes Robert Ryf of Los Angeles, Calif., "so am enclosing the necessary stamps. Gee, you sure must be a regular fellow to write such swell books. I received the *Pedigreed Pickles*, *Freckled Goldfish* and *Tittering Totem* books for Christmas. They sure are keen. My mother likes the Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books, too. When I was sick she read them to me and got a lot of fun out of it. I have every book of both series except the *Galloping Snail*, and I am going to get that book soon."

"Although I haven't got a boat," writes John Dunn of Chicago, Ill., "I've got a little gray rat called 'Tittering Totem.' My mother didn't like the idea of having him around

the house, so I have to keep him in the basement. I made a box for him and he lives a great life. I've written a poem about him. Here it is:

My Pet

"My little pet's name is Tittering Totem—
He is neither a dog nor a cat.
As you cannot guess, I will have to confess,
He's only a little gray rat."

John adds that he's attempting to write a book entitled *The Mystery of Burnshire's Mansion.* A man comes up missing and some boys solve the mystery. So far six chapters have been written. "I can never give you enough praise for your books," concludes John. "I've read 'em all."

"My pal and I," writes Jim Riel of Utica, N. Y., "taught his parrot (General Todd) to stutter and say blub-blub-blub-blood, only the parrot instead of saying blood, says: 'Gu-gu-give m-m-me a b-b-bucket of blub-blub-blood *and a cracker.*'"

FRECKLED GOLDFISH

OUT of my book, *Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish,* has grown our great Freckled Goldfish lodge, membership in which is open to all boys and girls who are interested in my books. Thousands of readers have joined the club. We have peachy membership cards (designed by Bert Salg, the popular illustrator of my books) and fancy buttons. Also for members who want to organize branch clubs (hundreds are in successful operation, providing boys and girls with added fun) we have rituals.

To join (and to be a loyal Jerry Todd fan I think you ought to join), please observe these simple rules:

(1) Write (or print) your name plainly.

(2) Supply your complete printed address.

(3) Give your age.

(4) Enclose two two-cent postage stamps (for card and button).

(5) Address your letter to

Leo Edwards,
Cambridge,
Wisconsin.

LOCAL CHAPTERS

TO HELP young organizers we have produced a printed ritual, which any member who wants to start a Freckled Goldfish club in his own neighborhood can't afford to be without. This booklet tells how to organize the club, how to conduct meetings, how to transact all club business, and, probably most important of all, how to initiate candidates.

The complete initiation is given word for word. Naturally, these booklets are more or less secret. So, if you send for one, please do not show it

to anyone who isn't a Freckled Goldfish. Three chief officers will be required to put on the initiation, which can be given in any member's home, so, unless each officer is provided with a booklet, much memorizing will have to be done. The best plan is to have three booklets to a chapter. These may be secured (at cost) at six cents each (three two-cent stamps) or three for sixteen cents (eight two-cent stamps). Address all orders to Leo Edwards, Cambridge, Wisconsin.

CLUB NEWS

EVEN before I got your booklets telling how to organize a local chapter, my chums and I had such a chapter," writes Joe Gene Shanes of Altoona, Pa. "We never did any initiating, but were known all over high school because of our secret order that everybody wanted to get into."

"How about it?" writes another Freckled Goldfish. "If a member loses his card or button, can he get another?" And the answer is, sure thing.

"Last summer," writes J. de Forest Congleton of Rockford, Ill., "I was up to your house at Lake Ripley and since then I have started a local chapter. Enclosed are the names of two boys."

J. de Forest was one of the many boys who called on me last summer. But, alas, I didn't always remember to record the young visitors' names. And rather than publish a partial list of names (which would disappoint the callers who weren't represented) I'm going to omit the list entirely. But next year every young caller will have to register before he gets into the cottage.

"Our local chapter," writes Paul Oberlin of Mansfield, Ohio, "has its meetings in the upper part of my grandfather's garage. We have seven members whose lodge names are: Walt Wentz, Leader (Henry Bibbler), Paul Oberlin, Secretary (Poppy Ott), Bob Dirlam, Chief Initiator (Jerry Todd), Tracy Dirlam (Peg Shaw), Lionel Culp (Red Meyers), George Leip (Scoop Ellery) and Tom Marines (Rory Ringer)."

Paul sends me his picture taken in his bathing suit. About six months after I received his letter it was my pleasure to meet him at his home in Mansfield. A swell kid, let me tell you. Later, in Florida, I met Bob Dirlam and had many pleasing trips with him to the beaches, where we gathered shells and fooled around. I heard a lot about the club. And honest, fellows, if you don't organize a local chapter of your own you're missing a lot of fun. We have everything to help you with your club. So why not get busy *now* and line up four or five of your boy pals for membership?

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LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a list of Leo Edward's published books:

THE JERRY TODD SERIES

JERRY TODD AND THE WHISPERING MUMMY
JERRY TODD AND THE ROSE-COLORED CAT
JERRY TODD AND THE OAK ISLAND TREASURE
JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN
JERRY TODD AND THE TALKING FROG
JERRY TODD AND THE PURRING EGG
JERRY TODD IN THE WHISPERING CAVE
JERRY TODD, PIRATE
JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT
JERRY TODD, EDITOR-IN-GRIEF
JERRY TODD, CAVEMAN
JERRY TODD AND THE FLYING FLAPDOODLE
JERRY TODD AND THE BUFFALO BILL BATHTUB

THE POPPY OTT SERIES

POPPY OTT AND THE STUTTERING PARROT
POPPY OTT'S SEVEN-LEAGUE STILTS
POPPY OTT AND THE GALLOPING SNAIL
POPPY OTT'S PEDIGREED PICKLES
POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH
POPPY OTT AND THE TITTERING TOTEM
POPPY OTT AND THE PRANCING PANCAKE
POPPY OTT HITS THE TRAIL

THE TUFFY BEAN SERIES

TUFFY BEAN'S PUPPY DAYS
TUFFY BEAN'S ONE-RING CIRCUS
TUFFY BEAN AT FUNNY-BONE FARM
TUFFY BEAN AND THE LOST FORTUNE

THE ANDY BLAKE SERIES

ANDY BLAKE
ANDY BLAKE'S COMET COASTER
ANDY BLAKE'S SECRET SERVICE
ANDY BLAKE AND THE POT OF GOLD

JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN

CHAPTER I

THE YELLOW FACE

DID you ever hear of people turning into bullfrogs and bloodsuckers and caterpillars and squash bugs?

We never did until Professor Puttyputter told about it in the Tutter police station. He called it transmigration. According to his story the people who turn into cockroaches and things are Jains; and Jains are kind of like Methodists and Baptists and Unitarians. Jainism is a religion, only there aren't any Jain churches in this country, which is a good thing I'll tell the world. After finding out what I did about the waltzing hen that's enough Jainism for me!

It happened the week after the Fourth of July.

I remember that because I was broke, having spent all my money for skyrockets and a new pane of glass for Mrs. Higgins' bay window, which one of the rockets went through accidental-like.

And this is the way it started:

I was wiping the dinner dishes for Mother so she wouldn't be tardy for the afternoon meeting of the Stitch and Chatter Club, which was election of officers, when all of a sudden I heard a giggle and there was Scoop Ellery and Peg Shaw squinting in through the back screen door. With his grin spreading from ear to ear Peg looked all mouth, which is the way he usually looks when he's tickled.

"Got a new maid, Mis' Todd?" he snickered, like it was a joke on me to be caught wiping dishes with an apron tied under my arms.

"Yes, indeed," said Mother; and she gave me a kind of chummy wink as she soused the dishes in the pan and invited: "Come in and take a better look at my fine new maid and tell me what you think of 'her.'"

The screen door slammed behind Scoop and Peg and they took seats near the ice box. This looked to me like a swell chance to show off. So I grabbed the corners of my apron like it

was a skirt and started prancing around, only I got back to the dish-wiping job in a jiffy when Mother made a swipe at me with the soggy dish rag.

"What mischief are you boys planning to get into this afternoon?" she inquired, looking us over.

"Oh, nothing special," said Scoop. "Swimming, maybe."

"Well, I'm going to be away for a few hours and if I come home to find tracks on my kitchen floor or the cover of my cookie jar moved I may take a notion to switch the three of you."

"How about the cherry pie that was left over from dinner?" I put in. "Can we have that?"

She looked at me.

"I thought you wanted the pie for the Cap'n," was her reminder.

I had forgotten.

"It's in the refrigerator on a cracked saucer," she proceeded. "And for goodness' sake, Jerry, bring back the dish, even if it is an old one. I don't mind your toting pie and stuff over to the Cap'n, but I do object to giving away my dishes. He has three of my china cups and four bluebird plates and one of my silver forks and a cake tin——"

"I'll get the cups and everything this afternoon," I promised.

There wasn't any more dishes to wipe so I dried my hands on the apron and hung it on a hook by the basement door. I never kick on wiping dishes like some kids do. No, sir-e. It's a help to Mother and the easiest way I know of to get clean hands.

When we were leaving with the cherry pie Mother said to Scoop and Peg:

"Well, which one of you boys do I have extra for breakfast to-morrow morning?"

"Me," said Peg, letting his grin roam around.

"That being the case," she returned, "you and Jerry just sashay out to the tent and make up your own beds because I'm in a hurry."

I have a pretty slick tent, with a floor in it, two single beds and a little electric light connected to four dry cells. It's fun to sleep outdoors. Just like camping. One night Scoop stays with me, then Peg, then Red Meyers.

Scoop waited in the shade of the house with the cherry pie while Peg and I set to work on the two beds. It was hot in the tent. Hearing a lady's voice I squinted outside. There was Mrs. Meyers all dressed up for the club meeting with a big fancywork bag hung on one arm. She was

bearing down hard on a pasteboard fan with an advertisement I knew by heart printed on the back:

KIDDER'S ICE CREAM!

Don't Kid Yourself
Into Thinking That
Any Other Ice Cream
Is as Good as
KIDDER'S!
It's a Food—Not a Fad!
Kidder's Creamery, Ashton, Illinois

"Is your ma ready, Jerry?" she inquired.

"I think she's upstairs dressing," I returned.

Here Mother came to an open window with a curling iron in her hair and called down:

"I thought I was smart getting my dinner dishes out of the way so quick, but I see I can't hold a candle to you."

"My dinner dishes are all in a pan in the sink," Mrs. Meyers said easily, as though a few dirty dishes more or less meant nothing in her gay life with a chance, maybe, of being elected Senior Stitcher or Champion Chatterer.

"Jerry," Mother called down as she gave the curling iron a new mouthful of hair, "can't you

run and get Mrs. Meyers a chair? Where's your manners?"

I started for the house, but Mrs. Meyers stopped me.

"What's the sense of bringing a chair out here? I'll go and wait on the front porch."

Peg was grinning in his usual liberal way.

"Say, Mis' Meyers, you ought to get Red to wash your dishes for you. Jerry can give him lessons how to do it."

She sputtered out:

"Donald wash dishes? That's a joke. Why don't you tell me the world is coming to an end. If he offered to wash or wipe the dishes for me I'd think I was losing my mind. All he does is eat and sleep and fall off roofs and things to scare the wits out of me."

She started for the porch, then paused by the yellow rose bush to cool her nose with the ice cream fan.

"I wish you boys would go over and make him come down out of that hot barn," she added. "It's his dove house: he's putting a bay window on it or something. And he's perched on the top of that rickety stepladder he picked up somewhere around the neighborhood. Oh, dear! I'd rather raise a dozen girls than one boy. If it

isn't a collar bone cracked it's a rusty nail through his foot or the green-apple colic to keep me up nights with him or one of a million other troubles to bring on the gray hair and wrinkles—— There! If I haven't started out without my shammy. Oh, dear! I'm always forgetting something. Mr. Meyers says I'd forget my head if it wasn't fastened to me."

Pretty soon Peg and I had the beds fixed up as slick as a button. Then we beat it down the street and turned in at Red's house, only Scoop tripped on a croquet arch when we were crossing the lawn and it took us several minutes to dust off the Cap'n's cherry pie.

Mr. Meyers uses his barn for a garage and hen house. Like Mrs. Meyers said, Red was up in the hayloft banging away with a hammer We left the pie on a chicken-feed box, with a piece of tar paper over it to keep the hens from eating it, and tumbled pell-mell up the stairs.

"Hi!" grinned Red from the top of the step-ladder.

His dove house is a big box nailed to the inside of the barn's wooden wall, close up under the roof peak, with holes cut into the wall so the doves can go in and out.

"Gee-miny whillikers it's hot up here!"

panted Scoop. "What in Sam Hill are you doing?"

"Oh, my old dove house door was a nuisance," explained Red. "I've been changing it. See how slick it works now. Lookit, fellows. Got spring hinges. When I pull it down and let go it snaps right back to place."

"You've got a door big enough for a goat," criticized Peg. "Why don't you take your box down and call it a dog house?"

"Well, what if it is big?" sputtered Red, getting huffy. "It's that much easier to clean out, isn't it?"

"We'll clean you out if you don't shin down that ladder. Come now; make it snappy."

"We're going swimming in the fourth quarry," put in Scoop. "Come on, Red."

Peg likes to tantalize Red and get him mad. Now he took hold of the ladder and gave it a shake. Gee! It rattled worse than Ed Arnold's old milk wagon. Red gave a screech and grabbed a rafter.

"Um——" said Peg kind of reflective-like. "This ol' ladder is pretty wabbly. Needs overhaulin', I reckon," and he squinted at it like he was worried over its loose-jointed condition and gave it another jiggle.

"Hey, you poor carp! Cut it out or I'll soak you with this club. *Hey!*"

"You swing that club at me, you abbreviated turkey egg, and I'll pull every one of them freckles of your'n out by the roots and tie 'em in knots and make you eat 'em raw."

"Let go of the ladder, then."

"You come down."

"I will when you let go."

"Your mother told us to chase you out of here."

"Aw, beat it."

"I'll give you till I count three," said Peg. "One, two, three," and the ladder shivered in his hands as though it had weak knees.

He should have known that Red would swing the club. Yes, sir, you've got to keep your eyes peeled when you get Red huffy. His temper is as fiery as his hair. Spunk is his middle name. That's one reason why we like him so well, I suppose.

Peg dodged just in time.

"I'll get you for that, you sawed-off sorrel-top," he cried, bounding up the ladder.

Red giggled and swung onto a beam like a monkey. It was fun to watch them. Big and husky for his age, Peg couldn't keep up with the

other at all in a straightaway scramble. Pretty soon, though, he had Red cornered. There was a tussle on the beams and both fell to the floor, only Peg landed on top. Lucky thing for Red there was some old hay on the floor.

It took him several seconds to get his wind.

"You big cow!" he screeched. "I'll get even with you. Just you wait—*elephant!*"

"Aw, you two fellows are always scuffling," put in Scoop. "Forget it and let's go take a dip."

We clattered down the stairs and picked the ants out of the Cap'n's cherry pie. Soon we were in the street, hurrying in the direction of Dad's brickyard.

It was our plan to leave the pie at the Cap'n's house the other side of the brickyard, then head for the fourth quarry, which is just outside of town beyond the Tutter Cement Mill. On the way home we would get the dishes and fork.

Mother and Mrs. Meyers were walking in the street a short distance ahead of us. I could hear Red's mother reciting her troubles. The weather was so hot the hens wouldn't lay and something-or-other she was using on her face for freckles made her nose feel puckered.

"Here's the boys," said Mother, when we overtook them.

"Yes," sputtered Mrs. Meyers, "and I don't need a magnifying glass to notice that Donald has on the same shirt I told him to change yesterday morning."

"Aw, this shirt isn't so dirty," grumbled Red.

Mrs. Meyers' thoughts switched and she caught her breath.

"There! If I didn't plum forget to send Mr. Meyers' white shirts to the laundry. He'll have a spasm. Donald, like a good boy, run back to the house and get them. Please. They're all wrapped up. You'll find the bundle on the ice box. Or if it isn't there look on the kitchen cabinet or on the chair in the bathroom."

Red didn't like the idea of going back. He let out a yip, but his mother sharply brought him to time.

"Now, quit your growling and do what I tell you," she ordered. As he started away she called after him: "Be sure and lock the back door when you come out and put the key under the cat's dish."

We waited at the corner until Red came running with the bundle containing his pa's dirty shirts. Then we headed for the laundry, taking a short-cut through the brick-paved alley that

borders the Commercial House on the dining-room side.

When we were close to the hotel Scoop held out his hand and stopped us in our tracks.

"S-h-h-h!" said he, pointing ahead. "There is old Mose, the hotel porter. Talking to himself, as usual. Isn't he the old gilly? Lookit the way he's wagging his head. Um—— Let's tiptoe up behind him and surprise him with a ghost screech."

We grinned at this suggestion. Old Mose is a warm friend of ours and we knew he wouldn't get riled over a little scare.

As far back as I can remember he always has worked around the Commercial House, carrying grips and washing windows and doing similar work. He is rather old and a bit stiff, with bending shoulders and scraggly white whiskers. Each Christmas Mother reminds me to buy him a present out of my allowance. It tickles him.

Well, we got onto our toes and snuck up behind him with scarcely a sound. He was standing in the alley beneath a fire escape that zigzagged its way up the brick wall of the three-story hotel building to the roof.

"Yassuh," he was mumbling to himself, emphasizing his words with movements of his bony

right hand, "yassuh, boss, ah aims to tell you as heow dey am somefin' pow'ful queer 'bout dat trunk. Dey is fo' a fac', boss."

"He thinks he's talking to Mr. Tomlinson who runs the hotel," Scoop breathed into my right ear.

"Ah hain't gwine to tech dat trunk no mo', boss, ah hain't. Nosuh. Ol' yaller face he kin jes' tote his own trunk 'round, boss, and ah's meanin' dat, ah is. You don't ketch dis cul'ud gen'man makin' friends with no trunk as is got spee-rits in it. Nosuh."

"B-r-r-r-r-r!" went Scoop, like a crosscut saw biting into a nail.

Mose gave a yelp and wheeled so quickly he almost twisted himself into a knot.

"Look heah, yaller man," he screeched, his eyes bulging, "don't you go lettin' no spee-rits out of yo' trunk to hoodoo me. Git 'w'y from me, yaller man. Git 'w'y from me."

"What's the matter, Mose?" grinned Scoop.

The terror went slowly from the old darkey's rolling eyes.

"Mah, lan'!" he quavered, his knees wabbling. "Ah thought as heow you-all was de yaller man. Um—— You young rapscallions, what you mean, sneakin' up on poo' ol' Mose to skeer him

dis-a-way? Hain't ah allus bin yo' frien'? Cou'se ah is."

"Here's an apple, Mose," I offered.

"And here's some chewing gum I've been saving for you," said Scoop.

It was new gum that hadn't been chewed.

The black face beamed.

"Ah reckons as heow dey make angels with white wings outen good chil'un like you-all is. Yassuh."

Scoop gave another grin.

"I guess we won't try scaring you again, Mose. Golly! You 'most jumped out of your skin. What makes you so nervous all of a sudden?"

"It's de yaller-faced man. Ah is a-feered of him, ah is."

"What yellow-faced man?"

"De queer-actin' gen'man who come to town on de mawnin' train."

"Is he stopping at the hotel?"

"Yassuh. An' if his ol' trunk rots in room fo'teen ah's not gwine to tech it. Nosuh. Like ah tells it to de boss——"

Scoop was curious now.

"What trunk are you talking about, Mose?" he inquired eagerly.

"De one which ah toted up to room fo'teen fo' de yaller man."

"What's wrong with the trunk?"

"Ah hain't knowin' what's wrong with it; an' ah hain't keerin' to fin' out. Nosuh. When a trunk ah is totin' on mah back starts *whisperin'*, right away——"

"Whispering?" cut in Scoop, sort of holding his breath.

"Yassuh."

"You mean something inside the trunk whispered?"

"Yassuh."

"What was the whispering about?"

"Didn't ketch no meanin' to de words. It was jes' 'Hum-um-um-um-um. Hum-um-um-um-um.' Like ah tells it to de boss, dey is spee-rits in dat trunk. Yassuh."

Here a woman came to a doorway and called:

"Mo-ose! Oh, Mo-ose!"

"Yes'am, Miz Preeny. Ah's comin', Miz Preeny."

He started away with a stiff shuffle, then paused reflectively, as though of a notion to tell us more about the mysterious trunk. But his thoughts were not put into words. A few seconds later he

proceeded on his way to the hotel kitchen, disappearing into the doorway.

Scoop gave a low whistle.

"Well, I'll be jiggered. Whoever heard of a whispering trunk?"

"I'd like to hear it," said Peg.

"You and me both," I put in.

"A whispering trunk," Scoop repeated slowly. "Um—— Sounds like a fairy tale. Of course it can't be spirits, like Mose says. Now I wonder——"

Red pricked up his ears.

"I bet it *is* spirits," he argued. "How else can you explain the whispering?"

"Spirits your grandmother. It's a ventriloquism trick," I declared. "Shucks! Throwing voices into trunks is an old stunt with people who know how to do it. Some one is putting up a joke on Mose. Probably the man who owns the trunk."

"I bet it *is* a voice-throwing trick," agreed Peg. "Eh, Scoop?"

But the leader seemed not to hear.

"A whispering trunk," he said for the third time, slowly and reflectively, as though he were weighing certain thoughts in his mind. "Um—— I'd like to take a squint at the owner of this

mysterious trunk. Wonder who he is and what he's doing in Tutter. Yellow-faced. Must be a Chinaman——"

He was cut short by a queer scraping sound that came down from above. Like the friction of shoes on the lattice floor of the iron fire escape.

Gee-miny crickets! My heart went bumpety-bump against my ribs. I bet you I was the startledest kid in seventeen states. For two or three minutes, anyway.

Peering down at us from the third story fire escape balcony was a stranger whose skin was the color of salad mustard. Never in all my life had I seen a man like him in appearance. He wasn't Chinese. Nor Japanese. Yet he was some kind of a foreigner. I could not doubt that.

For just an instant the sinister face hung over the sun-baked railing. The probing eyes burned into ours. Then the yellow face vanished into one of the hotel bedrooms.

"He was listening in on our gab," Scoop said steadily. "I wonder why. Can you think of a reason, fellows?"

His eyes sought Peg's, then Red's, then mine. But no one of us three had an answer to the riddle any more than he had.

A minute passed; two minutes; five minutes.

Nothing happened. We saw no more of the sinister yellow face; and, contrary to our hopes, Mose did not join us in the alley.

Presently Scoop spoke up:

"Gosh! I wouldn't want to meet that guy in the dark. Did you notice the nice friendly look he gave us? Like he wanted to tickle our gizzards with the business end of a dagger or something."

"Why should he seek to harm us?" I put in.

Yes, that is what stumped me. I couldn't make head nor tail of it. Why, indeed, should the stranger look at us like he wanted to butcher us? We had done nothing to make him an enemy of us. It sort of worried me.

"Maybe he looks that way at everybody," surmised Peg. "A habit, kind of."

Shortly after that we trailed out of the alley, heading for the Eureka Steam Laundry on School Street. The yellow-faced stranger and the whispering trunk gave us plenty to talk about. You know how kids are that way. We argued back and forth was the whispering a voice-throwing trick, like I said, or was there really something alive in the trunk? Peg said maybe what Mose heard was a groan instead of a whisper. Gosh!

Just to talk about it from that angle filled us with excitement.

I guess, though, our excitement would have multiplied itself a hundred times could we have known of the bewildering and uncanny circumstances under which we were again to come in contact with the yellow man and his whispering trunk.

Yes, sir, we had stumbled into a mystery and didn't half realize it.

CHAPTER II

ROMEO AND THE CATCHUP CATASTROPHE

DISPOSING of the bundle of dirty shirts, we hurried in the direction of the brickyard. Presently we came to the office, which is a small wooden building with an old-fashioned tin roof. I could hear Dad's voice. Rounding a corner to the front we found him there, waving his arms crazy-fashion and yelling into the air like it was the man in the moon he was visiting with.

I looked up. Old Paddy Gorbett was wavering on the peak of the office roof, a long-handled paint brush in one hand and a pail of red paint in the other.

"I say," yelled Dad, "look out and don't skid."

"Heh?" said Paddy, setting down the paint and cupping his hand over his right ear, which is the only one of the two that works.

"I say, look out and don't skid and break your neck."

"'Peck'?" mumbled Paddy. "'Peck'? Um——" and he scratched his chin reflective-

like, as though he were trying to figure out what "peck" had to do with the painting of a tin roof. "Did you-all say 'peck'?"

Dad was purple and wild-eyed.

"I said be careful and don't *fall,*" he screeched.

"Um—— You-all needn't be skeered a mite, Mister Todd. I ain't a-goin' to fall."

But hardly had he let go of the words when his feet went out from under him and down came the brush and paint, with Dad skittering to one side and dodging.

Gosh! All I could think of was a catchup shower.

"Hel-lup!" cackled Paddy, somewhere up in the air. "Hel-lup, Mister Todd! Hel-lup!" and when I looked up there he was hanging from the roof edge, his eyes bulged out like big glass marbles. He couldn't have looked any scareder if he had been hanging from the cornice of the Woolworth tower.

There wasn't time to run to the rear of the office and get the ladder he had used to climb onto the roof. So, with a grimace, Dad waded into the catchup and braced himself directly beneath the swaying legs. When Paddy dropped it was no trick at all for Dad to catch him, because, as I say, the office is a low building.

Paddy began to whine like a kid who expected a licking.

"You-all shouldn't a' yelped at me an' startled me, Mister Todd. It's all your fault. Yes, 'tis, an' you needn't look at me that-a-way, nuther. I'd 'a' had the roof all painted nice an' perty if you-all hadn't up an' hollered at me about a peck of somethin', which war plum nonsense, an' got me all flustered. It's all your fault, so 'tis; an' I might 'a' broke my neck or swallowed my new store teeth."

Dad was provoked. You couldn't blame him. His shoes were dripping paint and there were red streaks up and down his shirt and trousers.

But he didn't jump on Paddy and bawl him out. No, sir! My Dad isn't built that way. Instead, he gave a queer laugh, and right away I grinned because I knew he was going to spill some of his nonsensical lingo and turn the accident into a joke.

"Paddy," he said soberly, "I must confess that you are a disappointment to me. Yes, sir, a *big* disappointment. Out of all the craftsmen employed in this enterprising brick foundry I selected you as having the soul and touch of an artist. 'Verily,' I said to myself, 'Paddy Gorbett

is the *one* man in Tutter to ease the red paint onto our leaky roof with just the proper artistic shading.' "

Paddy stared blankly.

"Heh?" he cackled.

"And," went on Dad, "with high hopes and noble aspirations I brought you hither and intrusted into your keeping a perfectly good roof brush and two gallons of red roof paint that cost me three dollars and ninety-eight cents, f.o.b. Sears-Roebuck. And now—— Oh, Paddy, how bitter is the awakening to learn that my idol has feet of clay and the poise of a hippopotamus!"

Paddy looked dizzy; as though he were seeing six moons and the people all around him were walking on their heads.

"What in thunderation kind of a speech be you-all practicin' on, anyhow?" he wanted to know.

Dad sighed and waved him away.

"Paddy, you are no artist. Go back to Barney Kelly, the kiln foreman, and tell him to harness you to a truck."

Paddy gingerly picked up the dripping paint pail and gave it a severe once-over.

"Um—— 'Pears to me like you-all spilled the

hul durn shootin'-match, with your yelpin' at me," he cackled. And he pottered away muttering to himself and wagging his head.

Dad turned to where we stood grinning.

"Well, gang, whither bound?"

"Swimming," I informed.

"A great and glorious juvenile dissipation," said he, continuing his nonsense. "It makes the youth of our nation fragrant and flossy and provides our summer colonies of bloodsuckers and horseflies with three square meals a day."

Here he got his eyes on the cherry pie which I was carrying on the cracked saucer.

"Um—— I perceive that we are going to have refreshments," and he rubbed his stomach.

"Not you," I grinned. "You had your piece this noon. This is for the Cap'n."

"Son, your purpose is a noble one, but I fear you are doomed to disappointment. Ten minutes ago I called to see the Cap'n, thinking that possibly his tin roof needed painting, too. My gentle tap! tap! on his front door brought no response. So, with the Cap'n among the absent, as it were, I see no other way than to divide the pie into five equal bites and thusly dispose of it on the spot. Being the biggest, and a voter, naturally I shall expect the first bite."

"Shall we eat it?" I inquired, looking at the others.

"Might as well," suggested Peg, "if the Cap'n is away from home, like your pa says."

"All right," I agreed, and handed the pie to Dad.

He looked it over critically.

"Um—— Jerry, I don't want to appear finical, but it seems to me that this slab of pastry registers a somewhat crestfallen countenance."

"Scoop dropped it but that didn't hurt it none."

"Of course not," he said quickly. "Of course not. Well, here goes," and he took a big bite. "Um—yum! Wonderful pie. Wonderful. Who's the next victim?"

"Here," said Peg, taking a big bite.

There wasn't much left for the rest of us.

A titter came from the office doorway.

"Chicago is calling you on long distance, Mr. Todd," informed Dad's stenographer.

He started for the office, but came to a dead pause at the edge of the paint puddle and scratched his head. Then he squinted critically at his paint-covered shoes. I wondered if he would wade through the puddle or jump it.

"Ahem! As I was about to explain to the boys, Miss Tubbs, we are getting ready to re-

hearse the final act of that famous Shakespearean monologue: *Romeo and the Catchup Catastrophe.* See how nicely we have the stage set for a big murder scene. Blood to the right of us; blood to the left of us! G-r-r-r-r!" and holding up his trousers he high-stepped it through the puddle.

"Tee! hee!" went Miss Tubbs, jabbing a handkerchief into her mouth. Then she retreated into the office as Dad seated himself on the doorsill and unlaced his shoes, leaving them outside.

"Jerry," he called as we were leaving, "go hunt up Barney Kelly and tell him to send a man here with a wheelbarrowful of sand or a drawbridge."

"All right," I promised; and hiding the cracked saucer in an ash pile we went on into the brickyard.

The foreman grinned when I told him about the paint and what Dad had said.

"Sure, I've jist bin talkin' to ol' Paddy, an' he says your pa's gone cuckoo."

"It's Dad's way," I defended. "It's a good way, too. Shucks! Anybody with no sense at all can fly off the handle when things go crooked. That's dead easy. But not one man in a thou-

sand can take it cool like Dad and turn the trouble into fun. That's better than bawling people out and saying cutting things and getting everybody het up and grouchy, isn't it?"

"Begorra, your pa's all right," said Barney, spitting viciously at a grasshopper. "I'll fight the mon who says he hain't."

All of the brickmakers feel that way toward Dad. I think it's pretty fine. And when I grow up I want to be just like him.

CHAPTER III

THE CAP'N'S DANCING LEG

CAP'N BOAZ TINKERTOP is a nice old gentleman and one of the best whittlers we have in Tutter. We call him Cap'n because years ago he had charge of a string of tow boats that hauled grain up and down our canal. Maybe he is sixty years old. I don't know exactly. His wiry hair is a yellowish white. A bunch of white whiskers bristle from beneath his pointed chin. They make you think of a paint brush gone scraggly.

In mingling with people you probably have noticed the different kinds of character pictured in different faces. To me it seems that a man's face is a mirror reflecting what he is inside. If he has a *good* face, that means he has a kind heart and a clean, honest mind. No danger of him gypping you. If he has a *mean* face, with squinty, roving eyes, you want to look out. A *mean* face is the reflection of a dishonest mind and a wicked heart.

The Cap'n's face is the kind of a face you like to see on people. A trustworthy face. Honest-looking and sincere and kind. The nose he trumpets with when he sneezes is big and healthy, with a speckled wart on one side that looks like a potato bug; and the brown eyes that seem constantly to mirror friendly thoughts are rich and warm in their expression, like gingerbread fresh from the oven.

Now I've told you everything personal about the Cap'n except his peg-leg. I've left that to the last because, as you will learn in reading on, his wooden leg is one of the most important parts of my story.

We call it a dancing leg. The way he skids around on it when he gets one of his dancing spells is a scream. Dancing is his hobby—or would you call it a peculiarity? Let some one start whistling a lively tune and quick as scat he is on his feet dancing to beat the cars. Music sets him crazy. One time when I was appointed to pull the curtain in a church cantata I gave him a free ticket, but he said he didn't dast come to see me perform because like as not he'd make a monkey out of himself dancing up and down the aisle as soon as the music started. Maybe he was joking. Anyway, I coaxed like sixty, thinking

it would be bully if he *did* frisk around right in church. But he wouldn't come.

The Cap'n was in my mind as we passed through the brickyard clay sheds on our way to the fourth quarry and came into Zulutown. All that section of Tutter beyond the brickyard is called Zulutown. The Cap'n lives in a little, low-roofed house belonging to the brickyard. I understand that Dad gives him his rent free.

The house was all closed up, so we knew its tenant was away from home, like Dad had said.

"Probably fishing," I spoke up as we hurried by.

"Or taking a 'cruise' in his houseboat," grinned Scoop, kicking up the street's white dust with his bare feet.

We all laughed at that because the Cap'n's houseboat isn't the kind you can take trips in, and his "cruises" are a joke. It's just a pretend houseboat: a log raft with a shack built in the center. In a way it is the link that connects him to his canal-boat past. He likes to go there occasionally to stomp around and roar out orders at imaginary sailors and otherwise pretend he's a master once again. It's fun to watch him get one of these spells. We helped him build the

raft and shack. Dad donated the steel cables that anchor the houseboat to the Tutter side of the Illinois River.

It wasn't long after we passed the Cap'n's house before we came within sight of the quarry. Maybe I should explain that the Tutter Cement Company opened up the fourth quarry to strip cement rock, which is a less expensive operation than tunneling. Then, when a deep excavation had been effected in the solid rock, the quarrymen unintentionally tapped a vein of artesian water. In less than a week the quarry filled to the river level. Just like a big spring.

"I'm first one in," shrieked Red, beating it pell-mell along the cliff and down the rocky path to the ledge where we strip.

"Last one in is 'it' for tag," yelled Scoop, scooting along on Red's heels.

Gee-miny! You should have seen us peel out of our duds as we ran. Mother says it's a wonder to her how I lose so many buttons. It's no wonder to me.

We were in such a rush to get wet all over that we forgot all about paying the Genie to keep us from getting cramps. Peg was the first to remember. When he mentioned it we scrambled out of the water and dropped our pebbles into

the Genie Well, which we should have done before diving from the ledge.

"Paying the Genie" is a make-believe game; but it's fun, just the same as stamping white horses and a lot of other make-believe "luck" games. What we call the Genie Well is a three-inch hole bored straight down in the flat ledge where we pile our clothes. The quarrymen put the hole there with a drilling machine. Probably for blasting. There is a constant dull rumble in the hole, which you can hear plainly if you put your ear close, though, of course, it is no Genie, like Scoop declares. It was two summers ago we made up the game of paying the Genie. We save all the agate stones we find and before getting wet all over we each drop a pebble into the Genie Well. That is our pay, and it makes us lucky while we are in the water.

Tiring of water tag we lay on our backs on the ledge and read stories in the sky. Then when we began to feel the sun biting into our skins we jumped into the cool water and took a whirl at "hide the can." One of us would dive down and hide it under a rock and the others would search for it.

In his turn Scoop hid the can, and while Peg was under water Red shinned up to the ledge

where our clothes were piled and tied about sixty-seven knots in Peg's blue shirt and B.V.D.'s.

"I told him I'd get even with him," he grinned.

When Peg came to dress we gave him the hee-haw.

"Chaw raw mutton, chaw raw beef," is what we yelled at him when he bit into the knots like a puppy chewing on a leather strap.

He didn't say much. Just grinned and squinted sideways at Red. He knew well enough who was guilty. Peg's a good sport and you can't make him mad playing a harmless joke like that on him. But if you pull any rough stuff in earnest you want to look out. He's big and strong for his age, and a scrapper, I'll tell the world.

When we were dressed he made a lunge for Red and grabbed him by the topknot.

"Ouch!" screeched Red, clawing like a cat. "Let go my hair, you simp."

But Peg didn't let go. No, sir-e! He held Red off at arm's length and sputtered:

"Dance, you insignificant, red-headed runt. Come on now; shake a leg."

"Hey! Let me loose," squealed Red, clawing at Peg's hands.

"Dance."

"I won't."

"Dance."

"I wo'—— *O-u-c-h!"*

Scoop and I were laughing fit to kill. Red is pretty smart with his tricks and a dose of his own medicine once in a while helps to keep him tamed down. His yelling was mostly a bluff. Peg wasn't hurting him much. It was all in fun.

Scoop raised his hand.

"Just a minute," he grinned. "Um—— You can't expect Red to dance without music. Eh, Red?" and digging into his pants pocket, he brought out a mouth organ. Shaking the dirt from the holes, he started reeling off "Turkey in the Straw."

I wanted to be in on the fun, too, so I sang the words while he played. Maybe you've heard the song. It goes like this:

> Turkey in the straw, hee haw haw,
> Turkey in the straw, hee haw haw,
> The funniest sight I ev-er saw,
> Hee haw haw, turkey in the straw.

Well, in about a minute and fifteen seconds we were going it like sixty—Red dancing cow-fashion, Scoop spilling out "Turkey in the Straw" on his mouth organ and me singing at the top of my voice. I can't carry a tune very well but I

can put a lot of pep into it. We made a fearful racket. And the funny part is that Peg let loose of Red and started jigging. I lined up with him, and Scoop, too, and there we were, all four of us, dancing on the cement rock ledge like crazy Indians.

"Ship ahoy, deown thar!" came a gruff, throaty voice from the cliff. "What in tarnation kind of a fool show be you'n's tryin' to pull off?"

Our feet went dead in the wink of an eye and like dummies we stood there staring. On the brow of the cliff was a fisherman. We could see a cane fishing pole and a bait can in his hands, but no string of fish.

It was the Cap'n!

"Um—— Calc'late as heow you kids need a few p'inters on dancin', if that's what you-all be aimin' at. Yes, sir. Mebby you call that dancin' but it hain't. Not fur two cents nor a pinch of salt it hain't. You're jest hoppin' 'round like you was each stung in the seat of the pants with a yaller jacket. Cats! Codfish! That hain't no way to dance. You want to do it graceful-like an' not jiggle up an' deown like jumpin' jacks gone dizzy. Gangway! You jest watch me neow an' I'll show you a few dancin' tricks."

We were as tickled as a family of cats in a

milk house when he parked his pole and bait can on the cliff and started down the path.

"Here's where we have some *real* fun," chuckled Scoop.

When the old gentleman came into our group he looked us over with his big gingerbread eyes and ran his stiff fingers through the paint-brush whiskers.

"Um——" said he reflective-like, letting his shaggy eyebrows bush out. "Which kind of a dance be you'n's wantin' to see done first?"

I suspect my eyes sparkled. They usually act up that way when I get all bubbly inside.

"The one where you spin around like a top," I put in quickly.

He nodded his head good-naturedly.

"All right, Sonny. Tra-la-lum, tra-la-lum, tra-la-lum-lum-lum" and his fingers and thumbs went snap! snap! snap! "Jest chune up your orchestry. Gangway neow an' we'll git goin'. Tra-la-lum-lum-lum, tra-la-lum-lum-lum."

Gee-miny! Scoop hadn't reeled out more than a yard or two of "Turkey in the Straw" before the Cap'n was buckling down to his dancing job like he had been waiting seventeen years for this chance to limber up and show what he could do. Say, boy, he *danced!* I'll tell the world. I

thought I'd bust something inside, the way I laughed. He was all over the ledge. First he'd let his wooden leg swing out, then he'd switch and fan the air with his good leg. And every second or so he'd wind up and unwind, spinning around on his peg-leg like it was the point of a top. It was great!

"Ding dong! Two bells an' a clean channel. Shove up the steam, mate, shove up the steam," he heaved at Scoop. I could tell from the leader's purple face that he was running out of wind. But he was game and stuck to it.

"Atta-boy, Cap!" screeched Peg, spatting his hands in time to the music. "Another li'l' tail spin, Cap—only hang onto your whiskers an' don't get them tangled up in the propeller. You're the toad's toenails. Atta-boy, Cap!"

I was spatting, too, and yelling to beat the cars. It was exciting. But my laugh dried up like a drop of pancake batter on a red-hot stove and my heart skidded clean up in my throat to where my tongue is hinged when the Cap'n let out a scared screech and went squatty. That's the only way I can describe it. One second he was a tall man and the next he was a sawed-off. Just like the motion picture of Dr. Jekyl changing into Mr. Hyde. It gave me an awful jolt. I couldn't

get it—what had happened, I mean. Then I saw that the dancing leg had skidded into the Genie Well.

I guess the Cap'n never would have gotten his peg-leg out of the drill hole if we hadn't been there to help. Gee-miny crickets, how I pulled and tugged! I thought my backbone would crinkle up and snap into pieces. The others worked, too. Finally we got the leg out.

"Perty narrer escape," he panted in a wabbly voice.

We looked the leg over carefully. It wasn't damaged any as we could see, other than being ruffed up on one side where it had scraped the well's sharp edge. A little sandpaper would fix that all hunky-dory.

Here the cement mill whistle let loose to remind us that it was five o'clock and time to go home. Getting our caps and other truck we beat it up the cliff path, giving the Cap'n a boost over the roughest spots.

"Where is your fish?" asked Scoop when the old man stopped to shoulder his cane pole.

"Hain't bitin' to-day. Never got a nibble."

When we came into Zulutown he turned in at his home and we legged it in the direction of the brickyard.

Suddenly Red gave a yelp and pointed to the clay sheds, now covered with new colored posters.

"Lookit, fellows! Lookit! A tent show. What do you know about that?"

"Those pictures weren't there when we went by here right after dinner," Peg said thoughtfully.

"Of course not," Red said. "They were put up this afternoon while we were in swimming."

When we came closer, Scoop read aloud:

"Coming! Coming! Coming! Colonel Swisher's mammoth and colossal aggregation of world wonders and premier performers. Not a circus. Not a side-show. Something different. Educational. Entertaining. Fascinating. Enlightening. Introducing Sir Adamiah Spratt, the one and only Human Wishbone, who actually swallows swords and eats fire. See him! See him! See him! Sinbad, the tattooed man, will talk to you in seventeen different languages. And to lend grace and beauty to our varied program we have Fatima and her seven sisters, direct from the orient. Snake eaters; glass blowers; comical clowns. Also that talented entertainer, Professor Grandimore Hardiwig Puttyputter, the wizard supreme of the enlightened nineteenth

century, whose amazing and mystifying exposition of legerdemain has astounded and electrified the scientific minds of the entire world. Bewildering. Confounding. Baffling."

"What's 'legerdemain'?" inquired Red, squinting at the colored poster, which pictured a skinny man in a swallow-tailed coat dipping rabbits out of a stovepipe hat.

"Search me," said Peg.

"Isn't it magic?" said Scoop, letting his forehead pucker up. "The poster calls him a wizard. And he's doing tricks with that hat. Looks to me like 'legerdemain' is just a big-sounding name for sleight-of-hand."

"I bet you're right," said Peg.

"Sure," I put in.

"And just lookit the picture of that other guy," cried Red. "Cracky! He's swallowing a sword four feet long. Must reach clean to his knees when he gets it all swallowed. Huh! I bet it's a fake. No one's throat goes down that far."

"That's the Human Wishbone," said Scoop. "Um—— Maybe the sword swallowing is a fake and maybe it isn't. I think I'll go to the show and find out. July twelfth. Why, that's day after to-morrow. Ginks! I sure won't miss this."

"Me, neither," said Red and Peg in the same breath.

I didn't say anything. I was dead broke, and a fellow needs money to attend shows. On the instant I wished I hadn't spent all of my July money for fireworks. Two dollars is what Dad allows me for spending money each month.

Red cut in on my gloomy thoughts with another crazy yelp.

"Hi, yi! Just lookit over there, fellows," he screeched, "on Mrs. Maloney's board fence."

We looked.

"Huh!" said Scoop, like he wasn't interested for two cents. "Nothin' but the picture of a fat lady. I wouldn't turn my head even to look at *her*. What I want to see is the Human Wishbone and the wizard gink."

"Here, too," is what I said, forgetting for the moment that I was dead broke and couldn't go to the show, anyway. There was nothing in the fat lady's picture to interest *me,* even if the poster told the truth about her being a beautiful princess, weighing three hundred and ninety-five pounds.

Red and I separated from the others at the corner of Main and Grove Streets. All he cared to chatter about was the coming show. It made

me unhappy. Presently he turned in at the Meyers drive and I walked on alone.

Dad was home ahead of me. I could see his paint-spattered clothes on the line as I cut across the lawn.

About to hop up the back porch steps I paused and stared. There in front of my eyes was another poster of the Princess de Mozobal. It was pasted on the side of the big alley box we put ashes and tin cans in.

The mysterious, probing eyes gave me an apprehensive, uncomfortable feeling. I turned my back on the blamed picture. But that didn't do any good. More than ever I had the feeling that the *eyes were watching me.*

I wheeled and scowled at the pictured face. And you can believe it or not, but in response to my scowl the fat lady's smirk spread out like a fan and *she winked at me!*

I'll own up that I blushed. Good and plenty. Well, that was all right. What boy wouldn't blush to be winked at by a show lady owning three hundred and ninety-five pounds of fat and three chins?

Then I called myself a ninny for letting such crazy thoughts squeeze into my mind. Imagination was playing tricks on me. Yes, that was it.

A poster couldn't *wink*. It was just paper. Just a picture. Still——

I believe in signs and tokens. Nearly every boy does. And as I stood there on Mother's cocoa mat with the neighbor's cat licking a sticky spot on one of my bare feet I told myself that a token had come to me. Just like the time the raps came on Mrs. Bumblehopper's mixing board when she was making pie dough and the very next day her Jersey cow coughed up a tapeworm and died of convulsions.

But what was the meaning of the token? Was I in danger? Was something disastrous going to happen to me? Was the token a warning that I should keep away from the fat lady when she came to town with the show?

I never once thought of the yellow man and the whispering trunk. That is the queer part. As I look back I wonder at it.

I was pretty sober as I passed into the kitchen. Going to the sink I washed my face and hands for supper.

Somehow, though, I didn't care whether I had any supper or not. I guess my appetite had been crowded into a corner and consumed by the worried feeling that was chasing around inside of me.

CHAPTER IV

A MYSTERIOUS TRUNK

I WAS brushing my hair when Dad sauntered into the kitchen and beamed down at me. That was to let me know in a chummy way that he was glad I belonged to him. He's always like that. Mother, too. I love them for it. But this time I didn't grin back. A fellow can't grin when he has a mindful of worries like I had.

He noticed. Running his fingers up and down my ribs he inquired in a jolly way:

"Why the troubled physiognomy, Jerry, ol' pal? Got a bum tooth?"

"No," I said, wondering what he meant by "physiognomy."

"Been eating green apples?"

"No," I said again.

"Sliver in your big toe?"

"No."

"Some one rap you on the snoot?"

"No."

Here Mother came up from the basement,

wheezing and wiping the dust from a jar of pickles with her apron. I was glad to have her come into the kitchen. The interruption drew Dad's attention from my sober face. I didn't want him to keep on quizzing me till I had to spill out about the token.

Then the comforting thought came to me that maybe it wasn't a token after all. My imagination, probably. I hoped that was it. My scare began dripping away, like an icicle in the winter sunshine. And when Mother went to the stove and set the potatoes to sizzling in the frying pan I noticed that my appetite had found its way back into my stomach. I was glad.

Still, until I knew for certain the fat lady's wink *wasn't* a token, I had best be careful, I told myself. A fellow can't afford to get reckless about such things. No, sir-e! Take the case of Mrs. Bumblehopper's poor cow. She wouldn't admit that the raps on her mixing board were a token until the awful accident happened and her cow went blooey, with a whole page wrote up about it in a veterinary magazine and a picture of me holding the bottle which contained the tapeworm in an alcohol bath. Yes, I had best watch my steps and not forget to take my rabbit's foot from under my pillow each morning and

park it in my lucky pocket. It pays to be careful about one's luck. Absolutely! I wasn't scared of coughing up a tapeworm, but a hundred other things might happen to me as bad as tapeworms, or worse.

Dad was hovering at Mother's elbow, rubbing his stomach.

"Um-yum," said he, running off into his nonsense. "Mixed pickles for supper. Oh, boy! Mother, if there is one thing above all others that I adore you for it is your mixed pickles."

"Go set the chairs up to the table," laughed Mother, "and quit acting silly."

Soon we were eating supper with the cat mewing beside my chair and Mother doing most of the talking. The Stitch and Chatter meeting was a big success, she said, only the dip on the ice cream was stringy and why they elected Mrs. Bowman president instead of Mrs. Meyers was more than she could understand.

"Every one in town knows that Mrs. Bowman is trying to rent her house furnished so she can make her married daughter a long visit. And if she does get a tenant, off she'll go to Kalamazoo and we'll be without a president. But, of course, *I* wasn't going to be the one to get up and say so. Please pass the salt."

I pricked up my ears when Dad put in:

"I see we're going to have a show in town next Friday."

"Yes, sir," I said, easing up on my bread and jam so I could come into the conversation.

"I suppose you're intending to take in the big attraction?"

I shook my head.

He stared at me in surprise.

"No? What's the rip, Jerry?"

"The 'rip' is I haven't any jack," I explained dolefully.

"Your two dollars all gone?"

I told him about the fireworks and Mrs. Higgins' broken window light.

"Pshaw! I'll say you're out of luck," he sympathized.

"I won't be if you'll let me have half a dollar of my August money," I followed up quickly.

He went sober.

"Jerry, we had an understanding as to how I was to pay you the monthly allowance, didn't we?"

"Y-e-s, sir," I said.

"You haven't forgotten what the agreement is?"

"N-o, sir."

"Well, Son, an agreement is an agreement. We don't want to go back on our word to each other, do we?"

I was beginning to feel hard and stubborn inside.

"All the other fellows are going to the show; I want to go, too," I burst out. "If you'll let me have part of my August money this time I won't ever ask you again."

He slowly shook his head.

"No, Jerry. It would be establishing an unbusinesslike precedent that I want to avoid. Sorry, ol' pal, but I can't do it."

There was a hurt look in his face that made me ashamed of myself. A disappointed look. As though he had given me a chance to play a man's game in a man's world and I had acted the kid.

"All right," I said, hoping he would notice I was sorry.

Mother came into the conversation from another angle.

"Jerry, did you ask the Cap'n for my dishes, like you promised?"

"I'll do it to-night," I said.

"I'll get the dishes for you," Dad spoke up. "I left a note under the Cap'n's door saying I

would be back to see him this evening about his tin roof. I can get the dishes just as well as not. Dog-gone! I sure'll be glad when this roof painting job is out of the way."

Gee!

Right on the instant I saw my opportunity. Yes, sir, the idea popped into my head just as quick as a wink. It was hard for me to keep from wiggling I was so tickled.

"Is old Paddy going to paint your tin roofs?" I inquired, gluing my eyes to my plate so Dad wouldn't notice how bubbly I was inside.

"Not so you can notice it," he growled. "Blame him! I wouldn't trust the old coot to whitewash a fence of mine. He'd surely get hung up on a picket or something."

"Who *is* going to do the painting?" I followed up, keeping my voice steady.

"The first fellow who'll agree to complete the job for five dollars."

Five dollars! The two words echoed through my mind. I could almost feel the money in my pants pocket. Oh, boy!

"Do you furnish the paint?"

"Sure thing."

"And the five dollars is just pay for doing the painting?"

"That's the ticket."

"I'll do it for five dollars," I said quickly.

Mother excused me when I finished my second piece of cake and I left the table. Getting my cap and a handful of cookies and two doughnuts and an apple and a banana I beat it pell-mell for Red's house to spill the good news to him about the painting job.

"If you'll go in with me we'll split the five dollars even," I offered.

His eyes danced at the prospect of owning two dollars and fifty cents.

"Sure thing, I'll go in with you," he agreed.

"We can wear old clothes and throw them away if we get daubed up," I planned. "The painting'll be dead easy. All there is to learn is how to sozzle the brush in the paint and spread it on the roof. We can take turns."

"I'm a first-class sozzler," he grinned.

We were still talking about the painting job when Peg came skidding around the corner of the house on the run.

"I bet—you can't guess—who's in—town," he panted.

"Who?" I inquired quickly.

"The wizard gink."

"Professor Pussyfooter——" I began.

"Not Pussyfooter—Puttyputter," he corrected.

"Did you see him?" I inquired eagerly.

"Not yet. Scoop's pa told us about him being in town. He was in Ellery's store this afternoon with Bill Hadley. They're cousins."

Bill Hadley is the Tutter policeman. We think he's all right. One time when we were Juvenile Jupiter Detectives we helped him solve the mystery of the whispering mummy that was stolen from the Tutter College museum. He is still grateful to us for the fine detective work we did. So any time we take a notion to visit the police station we walk right in as chesty as you please with no fear of being kicked out. Bill is big and rough, with a lot of coarse gab, but he has a kind heart.

"Is the rest of the show troupe in town?" I inquired.

"Only the professor and a billposter. They're here putting up the show posters. Bill told Mr. Ellery that the county sheriff at Ashton has been holding the show property under an attachment —whatever that is. The Swisher fellow who owns the show is in jail there. Tried to gyp the Ashton people, or something. I don't know all the particulars. The attachment is to be lifted

to-morrow and they're coming here in wagons to put on their show Friday."

Here Red spoke up and asked where Scoop was.

"Down town, hanging around the hotel," informed Peg. "Said I was to come and get you fellows. Let's beat it. I bet if we go to the police station where Bill and the wizard are we'll get introduced. What do you say, gang?"

"Sure thing," returned Red and I in the same breath.

I thought to myself it would be pretty much of an honor to get an introduction to Professor Puttyputter. You see it isn't every day we have a celebrated wizard come to Tutter. No, indeed. One time when the city water went bad, with a dead something-or-other in the reservoir, the state health officer paid us a visit; and last summer the Human Fly spent a day with us shinning up and down the Methodist Church steeple and the town hall tower. But health officers and Human Flies aren't one-two-three as compared with really-truly wizards.

Pretty soon we were hotfooting it for down town. It was a tepid evening. The cement sidewalks and pavements were sponged full of the day's dry heat. The sun's slanting rays were

fiery fingers that sent the sweat into our faces and down our necks.

When we came to the store section Peg steered us across the street to the Commercial House. A few of the reed-bottomed chairs in the shade of the hotel awning were occupied by men reading newspapers. Just for fun we looked these men over, thinking we might run across the mysterious yellow man. But we saw nothing of the foreigner. Plainly he was in his hotel room or somewhere abroad in the Tutter streets.

Scoop was nowhere in sight. Thinking that possibly he was in the hotel lobby we pressed our noses against the plate glass window. But aside from the desk clerk, who was picking slivers of meat or something from his back teeth, the room was deserted.

Suddenly Red gave a yip and called our attention to a white arrow and the initials H.E. chalked on the cement sidewalk. We knew the initials were Scoop's, because his first name is Howard.

"Points down Main Street," said Red.

We started off. When we came to the Tutter park Scoop whistled to us from across the street. He was standing behind the Roll of Honor, mo-

tioning with both arms. We hurried over to where he was.

"What's the grand idea?" Peg inquired, meaning why was Scoop hiding behind the Roll of Honor.

"It's that blamed yellow man," scowled Scoop. "I was talking with Mose in front of the hotel and what do you know if I didn't turn around and find Yellow Face standing directly behind me. Had his back turned, but I knew he was listening. Gosh! I beat it in a hurry, I want to tell you."

Peg grinned.

"You should have stuck around and got an introduction. Then you'd know who he is."

"I know that already," said Scoop, his eyes going narrowed in a thoughtful way. "At least I *think* I do."

"Who is he?" I inquired.

"The billposter."

"Did you find out what's in his trunk?" Red put in eagerly.

Scoop shook his head.

"Mose declares it's spooks. I had quite a talk with him. He told me one thing that set me thinking."

"What's that?" demanded Peg.

"You remember the daggery look the yellow man shot at us?"

"Sure."

"We couldn't understand why he looked at us that way, seeing as how we had done nothing to deserve it. You said it was a habit—that he looked that way at everybody."

"I remember saying that," admitted Peg.

"Well, you're wrong. It isn't a habit. The look he gave us was *special.*"

"How do you know?"

"I asked Mose."

Peg looked bewildered.

"But why——" he began.

"That," cut in Scoop, "is exactly what I have been trying to figure out. And I've come to the conclusion that he has something in his trunk he doesn't want people to know about. He overheard us talking about the trunk, and the reason he flashed us that look of hate was because he feared we'd run around talking about the trunk and arouse people's suspicions. He doesn't want his trunk investigated. At least that's the way I've got it doped out."

"I wonder what *is* in the trunk?" Peg spoke up, an eager look roaming around his face.

"Mose insists it whispered. That means just

one thing—in case Jerry is wrong about the whispering being a voice-throwing trick."

"You aren't thinking of spirits?"

Scoop shook his head.

"A human being," he said steadily.

Gee-miny crickets! Gosh! The goose pimples came out all over my body.

"I think we better beat it down the street and tell Bill Hadley," I said quickly.

Scoop again shook his head.

"Not yet, Jerry. Let's do a little investigating on our own hook. Time enough to tell Bill when we've found out if there *is* a boy concealed in the trunk or not."

"A *boy?*"

"Sure thing. You didn't think it was a giant in the trunk, did you? Huh! It's a boy, of course. Mose never could have carried the trunk had it contained a man. Now I wonder——"

"Yes?" I said eagerly, making the word a question so as to find out what he had in his mind.

"I wonder," he continued reflectively, "if the kid is in the trunk of his own accord. Um—— Must be. Otherwise he'd give a yelp to be let out. But *why* is he in the trunk? And *why* is the yellow man scared stiff we'll spill what we

know and likely start an investigation? Well, we'll never solve the mystery standing here. Let's get going."

Red had a worried look.

"Aw, it's none of our business," he put in. "Better tend to our 'P's' and 'Q's' and keep out of trouble."

Scoop gave him a sharp look.

"It *is* our business," he declared, with a spirited bob of his head.

"We aren't detectives or policemen," sputtered Red, stubbornly trying to enforce his point.

"We're citizens," said Scoop, letting his shoulders go back, "and a good citizen is always watchful over the welfare of his community. Yes, sir-e! Pa says so. Suppose he saw robbers breaking into the Tutter Savings Bank. Would he say to himself: 'Aw, let 'em rob the old bank for all I care. I'm no policeman to step in and stop 'em.' You know he wouldn't say that. Not on your tintype he wouldn't. Nor your pa, either, Red Meyers. You know it. Our pas would rush in, they would, like good citizens should, whether they had any money in the bank or not, and whang tar out of the robbers and drag 'em off to jail."

Red knows how to be aggravating.

"I don't see any banks getting robbed," he scoffed, letting his neck stretch out as he squinted in different directions.

"Bank robbers aren't the only kind of crooks likely to descend on a town like ours and stir up trouble. Maybe this yellow man is up to something a lot worse than bank robbing. Who knows? Being citizens, the same as our pas, I think it is our duty to investigate this matter. What do you think, Jerry?"

"All right, if you say so," I returned.

Maybe I didn't put it very brave-like. I don't know. It is fine and heroic to be a good citizen, like Scoop said, but I was hoping it wouldn't get me into trouble, with a pair of black lamps, or something worse.

"How about you, Peg?"

"Same here," answered Peg, who is always tickled to wade into any kind of an adventure, no matter how risky it is. It's nice to be gritty that way.

A sheepish grin came into Red's freckled face.

"Aw, I was just in fun," he crawfished; then added a bit stiffly: "Guess I've got as much grit as any of you fellows."

"Sure you have," Peg declared loyally; and I

saw his hand steal out and close over Red's warty fingers. That shows you what kind of pals we are. We slam-bang one another in fun; but when danger comes crowding in we hang together like four peas glued side by each in a pod. That is the only way to be pals, Dad says.

Scoop started off.

"First, we'll go hunt up the wizard gink," he said.

"You think the wizard knows about the boy in the trunk?" I put in.

Scoop looked me over as though I had maybe half as much brains as a paralyzed bedbug or snail. He was acting awful chesty and superior. It kind of got my goat. He needed taking down a peg or two.

"Jerry, the part of your body you hang a cap on is asleep," is what he handed me. "Make a sound like an alarm clock and wake up. Huh! If the yellow man *is* the billposter, like I think, of course the wizard knows about the boy in the trunk. If you and I were traveling around the country putting up show bills, and you had a mysterious trunk, wouldn't I get hep? Sure thing. Um—— I suspect we'll find the professor at the police station, seeing as how he's

Bill's cousin. If we do locate him there, you fellows just keep mum and listen in while I pump him."

During the course of our conversation the sun had dipped into the trees to the west of town. And on the heels of the vanishing shafts of light came the creeping shadows of early evening.

I had a nervous, expectant feeling as I walked in step with Scoop down the street in the direction of the jail building. As though just ahead of me a danger was rising up of which I knew nothing. Maybe I wouldn't have experienced this apprehension if it hadn't been for the token. But I didn't turn back. No, sir-e! Token or no token I wasn't going to desert my pals. A name I never want to be called is "coward" or "quitter."

Putting my legs into brisk motion drove some of the confusion from my mind. I now seemed in better control of the situation. And I kept asking myself over and over again if Scoop wasn't dead wrong in calling the wizard a crook? How could the show performer be a crook when he was a cousin of Bill Hadley's? Bill is an officer of the law, and a good officer, too, even if he is homely like a mud fence and bow-legged. I knew he wouldn't be chumming around with a crook,

cousin or no cousin. Not on your life! Bill shows favors to no one when it comes to enforcing the law.

And maybe Scoop was wrong about other things, I told myself as I leaned against Kennedy's barber pole and coughed up a bug I pretty near swallowed from hurrying along with my mouth open. About the boy in the trunk, for instance. That was a wild guess, more or less. Still, it could be the case, I admitted.

The police station where Bill has his headquarters is a part of our two-story town hall. The building is now painted yellow, but it used to be a beautiful red. Like fresh blood. I wish you could have seen it then. I liked it much better red.

Bill's office is on the ground floor, opening into Main Street. Beyond the office partition is the jail part. I've been in the steel cages a great many times, only I never brag of it to Mother. It gives her the shivers. I help Bill take care of the jail. That is why he is good to me.

Usually of an afternoon or evening you'll find a number of old fogies in the police station. Men sixty-seventy years old. They seem to think it's the best loafing place in town. Mostly they put in their time playing checkers and swapping

stories. Sometimes they just talk. Knowing how they hang out there, I wasn't surprised none when we came to the open door and heard a mixture of voices going: "Hee! hee! hee! Haw! haw! haw!"

We pulled open the screen door and stepped inside. No one paid any attention to us. All eyes were focused upon a tall, thin-faced stranger standing beside the imitation oak wall cabinet where Bill keeps the green bug powder he lets me sprinkle on the joints of the iron jail beds every Friday afternoon. The man was giving an exhibition, kind of; waving his lanky arms and spilling a lot of big-sounding sentences.

"It's the wizard," Scoop hissed into my ear.

"Is he doing tricks?" I hissed back, keeping my eyes peeled to see if the performer had his stovepipe hat with him.

"Looks like he's recitin' the 'Declaration of Independence,' " said Scoop.

He gripped my arm.

"Let's squeeze in over there beside your pa, Jerry."

I had noticed Dad in the group of men gathered around the sleight-of-hand performer. He had a package under his arm. I suspected it was

Mother's dishes because something stuck out through the newspaper wrapping that looked like the tines of a fork.

He winked and nudged me chummy-like with his free elbow when I wedged in beside him.

"Hi, Jerry, ol' pal. You got here just in time to see the fun."

"What fun?" I said.

"Keep your eyes on the purfessor. He's good."

Up front Paddy Gorbett was standing stoop-shouldered, head thrust forward, his good ear tuned in on what the wizard was saying to him.

"Now, my good man, if you will kindly lend me a hundred-dollar bill we will proceed with our entertainment."

Paddy's jaw sagged.

"Heh?" he cackled, cupping his good ear and giving it another hitch forward. "Did you-all say a hundred-dollar bill? Heh?"

I laughed along with the others, thinking to myself if Paddy ever saved up a hundred dollars the shock would likely go hard with him.

"Of course," the wizard said blandly, "if you haven't a hundred-dollar bill with you this evening we can proceed nicely with a five-dollar bill."

"Yep, I've got five dollars," said Paddy, hook-

ing the money in his pants pocket and bringing it to light. "You-all ain't goin' to keep it?" he inquired suspiciously.

"Certainly not, my good man; certainly not."

"I'll risk it," cackled Paddy, putting the greenback into the outstretched fingers.

"Now, gentlemen, as you observe, I have here in my hands a greenback loaned to me by this esteemable neighbor—— Beg pardon, sir," and Paddy was touched lightly on the shoulder. "I don't believe I know your name, sir."

"Patrick Henry John Alexander Gorbett," recited Paddy.

Looking into the circle of grinning faces, the wizard proceeded:

"Now, as I was saying, gentlemen, I have here in my hands a one-dollar bill——"

"No it ain't," Paddy cut in, flourishing his knobby hands.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I say it ain't."

The professor looked puzzled.

"My dear fellow. I fail to catch the drift——"

"I say it ain't no one-dollar bill," Paddy screeched. "It's a five-dollar bill. My five-dollar bill," he added shrilly.

Unfolding the greenback the professor looked it over carefully and scratched his head.

"There is some misunderstanding," he said slowly. "The bill I have here is a one-dollar note, as you can see, and *not* a five-dollar note, as you contend."

Paddy's eyes were bulging.

"Hey!" he cackled wildly. "What you-all gone an' done with my five dollars? Consarn your pesky hide, you ain't goin' to play me fur no sucker. Gimme back my five dollars, you ol' slicker."

The wizard stiffened like his feelings were hurt. I suspected, though, from the way Dad and the others were guying Paddy, telling him to stand up for his rights and not get flimflammed, it was all put on—the stranger acting hurt, I mean. His changing the money from five dollars to one dollar was a magic trick. It was done to get Paddy on his high horse.

"Sir, as you seem disposed to question my honesty, the only course left open to me is to return your money," and the sleight-of-hand performer extended the one-dollar bill.

With the other men egging him on, Paddy let his courage bubble to the brim.

Off came his coat.

"I'm fifty-seven years old," he screeched, "but I kin lick the sucker who tries to skin me outen my money. Yes, sir-e-Bob! You ol' faker! Cough up my five dollars a-fore I count ten or I'll push your long snoot into the middle of next Jan'ary."

Gee whillikers! The way he pranced around, pumping his fists up and down, was a scream.

Dad was holding the discarded coat. Suddenly he pulled a five-dollar bill from the breast pocket.

"Hey, Paddy," he cried, "what's this?"

I caught on. And maybe you think I didn't laugh. Everybody was laughing but old Paddy. The wizard, in touching the other on the shoulder to inquire his name, had slipped the money into the coat pocket and substituted a one-dollar bill of his own.

Well, Paddy looked pretty sheepish. But he's a game old coot, I'll tell the world. Getting into his coat he slapped the wizard on the shoulders.

"Perty gol-durned slick. Hee! hee! Calc'-late as heow I ought to treat on this. Yep. So come 'long, men, an' we'll skin over to the ice cream parlor an' each git a sody."

Bill had some trouble getting his rolltop desk locked, so Scoop and I hung behind. The wizard was there, too, walking up and down the room

with his hands thrust into his pants pockets and whistling. We followed him with our eyes.

Scoop hissed into my ear:

"Do you think he looks like a crook, Jerry?"

"Shucks, no," is what I hissed back.

Like I said earlier in my story, a man's face is usually a reflection of what he is inside, and there wasn't a thing about the wizard's thin face that wasn't friendly and square-like. His eyes were a clear blue. He had what I call a grinning mouth. Good-natured. With his high cheekbones and big ears he wasn't very pretty; but sometimes a man can't be famous and handsome, too. Yes, sir, I admired and respected him a lot. And I told myself that Scoop had him dead wrong on the crook business. Absolutely.

Suddenly I was lifted out of my thoughts by the ringing of the telephone bell. Bill barked a gruff "Hello; who-is-it?" into the mouthpiece; then listened, his face going grim and hard. My heart was skidding. Something out of the ordinary had happened. I could tell from Bill's actions.

The wizard had passed through the doorway into the street.

"Hey, Grandy," Bill called, "come here a second." Then he spoke into the mouthpiece: "All

right, Charley: I'll be over in a coupla minutes."

Slamming the receiver onto its hook he swung in his swivel chair and faced us, scowling.

"Say, Grandy," he inquired of the wizard, "who's this gink you're traveling with?"

A puzzled look came into the other's face.

"Traveling with?" he repeated, regarding Bill closely.

"Sure. The fellow at the hotel."

"Oh, you mean Parkva!" and the thin face cleared.

"Who is he and what is he?"

The wizard shook his head.

"I don't know much about him, Bill. He's only been with the show a week or ten days. What's the rip?"

"Is he on the square?"

"So far as I know—yes. I may say he's a queer duck."

"Queer?" Bill bit off the word.

"Has queer religious beliefs. As I understand it, he's a Jain."

"A which?" and Bill's scowl deepened as he leaned forward.

"A Jain. Believes in transmigration, and things like that."

"What in Sam Hill is 'transmigration'?"

"Jainism is a Hindu religion and Parkva is one of the million and a half natives of India who believe in Jainism and transmigration. These people contend that when a man dies he turns into a dog or horse——"

"Bunk!" Bill exploded, disgusted-like.

"It is his belief. You know, Bill, it takes a lot of queer people to make a world."

"Some people profess queer beliefs to cover up their crookedness," Bill spit out bluntly.

A concerned look came into the blue eyes.

"I don't think Parkva is a crook. He's queer, like I say——"

"Do you know anything about his trunk?"

Gee-miny! With Scoop's fingers digging into my arm I wanted to screech.

"He has a trunk, I believe," the wizard admitted.

"Know what's in it?"

The other shook his head.

Bill got to his feet.

"Calc'late we'll skin down the street and give your friend's trunk the once over. Just had a call from Charley Tomlinson, who runs the hotel, sayin' the nigger porter who carried the trunk upstairs is tellin' queer stories about it. The hotel help is scared into fits, thinkin' the trunk

is full of whisperin' spooks. Charley thinks it's moonshine."

Scoop let go of me and touched Bill on the arm.

"Say, Mr. Hadley—— Say—— I know what's in the trunk," he cried breathlessly.

Bill stared.

"A boy," said Scoop.

Well, sir, you never set eyes on a man who looked any grimmer than Bill. No sir-e! He shot a lot of questions at Scoop, and the latter told about our scare in the hotel alley that afternoon and the whispering trunk and everything.

Taking a big gun from his hip pocket, Bill squinted at the filled chambers in a businesslike way. Then he put a pair of handcuffs into his coat pocket.

"Come on, gang," he growled tensely, starting for the door.

CHAPTER V

A WEIRD ADVENTURE

It was dark when we came from the police station into the street. A smothering darkness. Stuffy. Brooding. The stars and moon were imprisoned in black sky pockets. Main Street lay bright under the white glare of the store and corner lights; but the alleys and unfrequented side streets were shadowy lanes leading into night's blackest caverns. The air was dripping full of mystery. I could feel it; but I cannot describe it.

Peg and Red saw us trailing Bill down the street and came on the run.

"Hey!" cried Red, hitching up his khaki pants. "Aren't you fellows goin' to horn in on old Paddy's treat?"

"Nix," said Scoop; then he gave a hurried and breathless account of what had taken place in the police station.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Red.

His eyes were bulging. Peg's, too. Both

were filled with excitement to learn that Scoop and I were on our way to the hotel to investigate the mystery of the yellow man's whispering trunk.

Scoop was still talking about the mysterious stranger and his crazy Hinduish beliefs when we arrived at the hotel and followed on Bill's heavy heels into the lobby.

Mr. Charley Tomlinson came hurriedly from behind the registration desk, casting uneasy glances at the scattered guests in the lobby.

"Say, Bill, I want you to handle this on the Q-T," he enjoined in a low voice.

Bill understood.

"There won't be no disturbance 'round here unless the other guy tries to pull a rough getaway," he assured gruffly.

Stepping to the desk, Mr. Tomlinson spoke a few words into the clerk's ear and was given a brass key.

"It is a duplicate," he explained. "We may have no need for it; still it will do no harm to take it along. Shall we go up now?"

The wizard's thin face was sober.

"I think you men are doing Parkva an injustice," he put in steadily. "You have no case against him. Absolutely none. A superstitious

negro starts a crazy story and right away you get excited and jump to conclusions——"

"Now, look-a-here, Grandy," Bill said heavily, tapping his cousin on the chest with his club, "we're not goin' to rough-house your friend or hurt him none. No need for you to git on your high horse, old fellow. Take it cool, now; take it cool. If he's on the level he can prove it easy enough, can't he?"

"I've been working with Parkva all day. He never mentioned moonshine. As for having a kid in his trunk—bunk on that stuff!"

Bill's thoughts took a new course. Turning to Mr. Tomlinson, he grunted:

"Did you know he's a Jain, Charley?"

The other was puzzled.

"A Jain?" he repeated, running his fingers over his bald spot.

"Believes in transfiguration—— No, that isn't it. What's the correct dope, Grandy?"

"Transmigration," the wizard supplied.

"Sure; transmigration," proceeded Bill. "Thinks when he kicks the bucket he'll turn into a pug dog instead of a he angel. Haw! haw! haw!"

"It's a Hindu religion," the wizard explained. "They call it Jainism in India."

The Commercial House hasn't passenger elevators like hotels in the big cities. So we walked single file up the carpeted stairs to the third floor. On the way we passed Mrs. Preeny, the hotel housekeeper, and another woman. They acted as though they were trying to see who could look the scaredest.

When we came to the door of room fourteen, Bill put a finger to his lips for silence. Stooping, he lined up his ear with the keyhole and listened.

The only sound that fell on my ears was the thump! thump! thump! of my heart. It was doing all kinds of crazy loop-the-loop stunts. I wondered if the others heard it.

Presently he straightened and said in a gruff undertone:

"Call him to the door, Charley, and explain why we're here."

Tap! tap! went Mr. Tomlinson's knuckles on the door panel.

No response.

Tap! tap! tap!

Still no sound from within the room.

"Must be in bed asleep," grunted Bill; and gripping his club he beat a sharp rat-a-tat-tat on the panel.

Still no response.

Here the wizard called out in a tense voice:

"It is Puttyputter, Parkva. Open the door, please."

If the bedchamber had been a tomb in the heart of the Sahara Desert the silence within its four walls could have been no more absolute.

Bill turned to the proprietor.

"Try your duplicate key," he suggested shortly.

But the key wouldn't enter the lock.

"Huh!" snarled Bill. "Just what I thought. The door's locked on the inside and he's in there playin' possum."

Rat-a-tat-tat went the police club on the panel.

"Open the door," Bill bellowed, "or I'll smash it in."

"S-h-h-h!" Mr. Tomlinson cautioned, putting a nervous hand on Bill's arm. "Good heavens, man! You'll arouse the whole house."

Scoop put in:

"Maybe he's locked the door on the inside and skinned down the fire escape."

A dumb look flitted across Bill's face. Bracing himself he lunged his two hundred and fifteen pounds against the door. Crash! went the lock. The door swung inward on its hinges.

"Turn on the lights," he yelled, plunging forward into the darkened room, the big gun gripped in his right hand.

It was Mr. Tomlinson who pressed the electric light switch.

Crowded into the illuminated room by those behind me, I found my eyes riveted on the mysterious trunk. It stood near an open window; an average-sized trunk; the old-fashioned kind; and the cover was raised.

Now was my chance to see if it contained a boy, like Scoop said. I eagerly started forward. Halfway across the room my feet tripped over something on the floor.

"Look out, you lummox!" roared Bill. And when I squinted down it was to learn that what I had stumbled over was a man's legs.

He was lying on the floor. Face downward. Motionless. Rigid. Arms outstretched, as though he had been struggling to get to the open window and had fallen in his tracks.

Bill turned him over. It was the yellow man! I shrank back. The eyes were staring. Glassy. The look in them was awful. As though he had been scared into a fit by the fearsomest thing in the world and the look had frozen there.

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Tomlinson, his

wits going scattered. "This is awful. It will give my hotel a black eye. Is he hurt, Bill? Is he breathing? Is he shot? I'm ruined! We must get a doctor. I'm ruined! Some one run for a doctor."

Bill slowly straightened and brushed his hands. There was an expression on his face I never had seen there before. Awe is what you'd call it, I believe.

"Yes, git a doctor and have the body examined," he muttered huskily. "And where is the nearest telephone, Charley? I want to call up the coroner at Ashton."

"Coroner!" screeched Mr. Tomlinson. "You mean he's—dead?"

Bill nodded.

"Deader'n a doornail," he advised slowly.

I was stunned. Filled with horror, kind of. And when the shivers in my body were tumbling around the wildest what did that crazy Scoop Ellery do but turn loose a yelp right at my elbow. I pretty nearly jumped out of my skin. And my knees started to spread out like one of these baby gates you see on front porches.

"Lookit!" he screeched, pointing.

Coming from under the bed was a yellow cat. The biggest cat I ever set eyes on. Say, it was

a whopper. I had to squint twice to make sure it was a cat.

Well, sir, every one in the room stood petrified, kind of, and horrified, as the cat came toward us. It didn't seem a bit afraid or timid, as most cats are in the company of strangers. Its back was arched. The tail was fluffed out. Pretty soon it was rubbing its furry sides against the wizard's shoes and going: "Me-eow! Me-eow!"

The showman's face was as white as the inside of Mother's enameled bread mixer.

"Is—is this your cat?" he inquired of Mr. Tomlinson.

"Good heavens—no!" cried the proprietor. "I never set eyes on it before."

"Yellow," the wizard muttered, staring down at the cat like it was a ghost. "Yellow. A yellow man and a yellow cat. Transmigration. A yellow man and a yellow cat."

Picking up the cat he peered into its face.

"Parkva!" he cried.

And right now comes the weird part of my story: You can believe it or not, but the yellow cat actually *nodded its head!*

A man turned into a cat! Gee-miny crickets! I was goose pimples from my ears down.

CHAPTER VI

THE WHITE DOORKNOB

WELL, in the next hour a lot of exciting things happened in the hotel. First, we were herded into the hall, so the room would be undisturbed when the coroner arrived to conduct the inquest. He was sent for as quickly as possible. Also Doc Leland. Doc came waddling up the stairs about nine-thirty, his eyes bulging behind his big nose glasses. Bill and Mr. Tomlinson and the wizard went with him into the bedroom, closing the door as much as the broken lock would permit.

Then the coroner came, about ten o'clock. Bill instructed us to wait in the hall, stating we might be called upon as witnesses.

It was almost ten-thirty when he came from the bedroom with the yellow cat in his arms.

"Take care of it till I need it, Jerry," he instructed, dropping the cat into my hands. Then he touched Scoop on the back. "You can come

in now and tell the coroner what you know," he added.

I can't say that I was very happy over the job of being nursemaid to the yellow cat. Even to touch it put the shivers into me, kind of. But I like cats. One time I had nine. And this cat was the friendliest old fellow I ever put hands on. He snuggled into my arms and purred like he was glad to have me for a friend. I couldn't go back on him. For I believe in being kind to animals.

Peg and I and Red stuck around waiting for Scoop to show up and tell us if the yellow man had been stabbed to death or what. Presently he came into the hall, closing the bedroom door behind him.

"What'd they do to you?" Peg quizzed eagerly.

"Oh, they asked me a lot of questions," returned Scoop. "Um—— Fellows, we've got a job lined up for us," he added mysteriously.

"What kind of a job?" inquired Peg.

"It's like this: Doc Leland says the man died of heart failure; and he and the coroner have it figured out that what caused his heart to fail was a scare. They're dead right, too. You noticed how he was lying on the floor—his arms outstretched toward the window. Now, just imagine

you are in the room with him before he died. *Something is escaping from the trunk!* Maybe it's a boy. Maybe a spook. I don't know. No one knows. Here," he motioned, "we have the trunk and over here the open window. The yellow man tries to get to the window *first*. To close it probably. And the fright you noticed on his face was put there because he feared he would be too late."

"Too late for what?" gasped Peg.

"To prevent the *peril* from escaping through the open window."

"Peril?" echoed Peg, his lower jaw sagging.

Scoop nodded.

"Whatever was in the trunk," he explained.

Peg drew a long breath and took a grip on himself.

"What do you suppose it was?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, unless it's a boy, like I said in the park. But it's a *peril,* whatever it is. Can't be otherwise. It scared one man to death. And for all we know to the contrary some one else is likely to get the same dose. That's why I say we've got a job lined up for us. In the park we pledged ourselves to be good citizens, didn't we, and do our part in protecting the welfare of the community?"

"Y-e-s, kind of," Peg admitted without enthusiasm.

"Well, there you are," and Scoop laid it off with his hands. "As good citizens it's our duty to run this mystery to earth."

"How can we," cried Peg, "when we don't even know what was in the trunk?"

"Well," Scoop shot back at him, "we solved the mystery of the whispering mummy, didn't we? Huh! I bet we can solve this mystery, too, if we keep our wits about us."

Here he squinted at the cat.

"Bill says you're to take it home with you, Jerry. He'll let you know when he wants it. Maybe never. He laughs about it being the yellow man. Says it's a joke. I don't know. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Anyway, that doesn't matter. It's a clew to the mystery and that is what we're interested in. I'm glad Bill wants you to keep it. Pretty swell cat, isn't it? Um—— Well, fellows, let's beat it for home."

It was eleven o'clock when we appeared in the deserted street. And when I squinted into the groping shadows I don't mind telling you that sixty-seven kinds of shivers took turns skidding up and down my backbone. Over and over again

I kept saying to myself, what was it that had escaped through the window? Scoop called it a peril. Boy, spook, or whatever it was, it had scared one man to death. Doc Leland said so. You can bet your Sunday shirt I didn't want to be victim number two. And it was taking chances, kind of, walking in the shadow of the terrace trees with limbs above our heads that something could easy enough drop off if it wanted to.

Like I told in the first chapter of my story, it was Peg's night to stay with me in my tent. So we said good-by to Scoop at the corner of Main and Grove Streets. Then we dropped Red. Gosh! You should have been there to see him skitter across the Meyers lawn and up the front steps into the house. Like something was grabbing at his heels.

There was a light in Mother's room. Hearing our voices she came to the window.

"Is that you, Jerry?" she called down.

"Yes'am," I called back.

"I was just on the point of sending your pa to look you up. Eleven o'clock at night is no hour for a boy to be gadding the streets."

"We haven't been gadding the streets," I said;

and then I told about the yellow man and the mystery trunk.

Dad came to the window and listened.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "Is that straight, Jerry?"

"You betcha. Gee, it was exciting! And tomorrow we're going to start in solving the mystery. We've got a clew."

"A clew?"

"Sure. Scoop says it's a clew. Here it is," and I held the yellow cat into the puddle of light that came down from the window.

Mother gave an exclamation of disgust.

"Good gracious! If he hasn't gone and lugged home another alley cat!"

"Alley cat nothin'," I sputtered, acting pretty stiff about it, too. "This is a transplanted cat, this is."

"Transmigrated," corrected Peg.

Dad laughed.

"Where are you going to keep it, Jerry?"

I hadn't thought of that.

"Not in the house," Mother put in quickly.

"I guess we'll keep it in the tent," I said.

"Sure," put in Peg. "We can tie a cord around its neck to keep it from getting away."

"Pretty risky," reflected Dad. "Um——

You might wake up to-morrow morning and find it transmigrated into a boa constrictor."

I knew he was joking.

"Good night," I said.

"Good night, Jerry, ol' pal. See you in the morning. If you need any help down there to charm the boa, just yell 'thirteen.' "

"Thirteen" is our danger cry. Dad knows about it.

He came to the window and added:

"By the way, Jerry, I ordered the roof paint when I was down town this evening."

Roof paint! I had forgotten about my roof-painting job. Under the night's weird adventure I had forgotten about being broke, too, and about the coming show.

I switched on the tiny tent light and tied the yellow cat to the front pole, leaving the cord long enough so the cat could sleep on the foot of my bed. Peg said he was hungry, so we divided my cookies and doughnuts. Then we got into our pajamas.

"All ready?" I inquired, with my hand on the light switch.

"Let 'er flicker," said Peg, tucking the sheet under his chin.

Out went the light.

My head was jammed full of rambling thoughts as I lay there. In imagination I lived over again the things that had happened to us that night. The yellow man; the telephone call; the body on the floor; the open trunk; the yellow cat; the escaped peril.

What was the meaning of this confused combination of circumstances? Why had the yellow man looked daggers at us from the fire escape balcony? What was the fear that caused his heart to go dead? And was the yellow cat transmigrated, or wasn't it?

Finally I dozed off. A dream caught me in its grip and carried me along. I could hear footfalls. Going around and around the tent. Stealthy footfalls. Only I wasn't in the tent. I was in a dense jungle. The prowling creature was a tiger. My campfire made glowing balls of its eyes. Green balls. Its back was a mound of gold. The footfalls ceased. The tiger was crouching to spring. I went sick with fear. A screeching cry. A hurtling, golden body. I could feel a stinking breath in my face——

The tent light flared up. Peg was standing beside the bed shaking me.

"Wake up, Jerry. The cat—— Didn't you hear it?"

I rubbed my eyes and looked down at the foot of the bed. The cat wasn't there.

Peg was pulling in the cord. Something rattled on the tent's wooden floor.

"It's a—a white doorknob," he gasped; then stared at me dumfounded.

That is exactly what it was. A plain white doorknob, attached to the end of the cord. Whoever had crept into the tent to steal the cat had left the knob.

We kept guard throughout the remainder of the night. I'd watch an hour; then Peg. But nothing happened.

Daylight came. First a foggy screening of the dense blackness that made shadowy shapes of the nearby trees and houses. Then the leaves in the tops of the trees caught and held the glow of the rising sun. Peg said we were safe now, so we both went to sleep.

Red woke us up. I looked twice at him to make sure that I wasn't having another crazy dream. Tipped on one ear was a cast-off derby of his father's. And he wore a black coat with long tails that came within six inches of the tent floor. Under the coat he had on a green bathing suit.

"I'm all ready for the painting job, Jerry.

These are the oldest clothes I could find. Pa's wedding coat," he giggled, switching the long tails. "Found it in the barn."

He grabbed one of my bare legs and tried to pull me out of bed.

"Get up, you lazy bum. With a mystery to solve and two tin roofs to paint, this is our busy day."

When he asked where the yellow cat was we told him about my jungle dream and showed him the white doorknob.

He gave a sharp cry.

"Why—it's *my* doorknob," he faltered, and stared at us. "I've been saving doorknobs. You know, Jerry. I have a whole row of them on a beam in the barn. See the mark here? This is the knob I got at the old haunted house. What in Sam Hill——"

I was dizzy; couldn't make head nor tail of it. Why should any one steal Red's doorknob to leave with us in place of the yellow cat? Was it a joke? I thought of Dad. He's always up to tricks. Yes, he could have snitched the cat on us; but how about the doorknob?

We talked it over while Peg and I dressed, coming to the conclusion it was the boy who had escaped from the yellow man's trunk. He had

followed us home, intent on stealing the cat as soon as we were asleep.

But why should he pull the crazy stunt of leaving the doorknob?

"Are you sure the doorknob was in your barn?" Peg inquired earnestly.

Red nodded, holding to the derby.

"Then," Peg said grimly, "I think we better search the barn. The mystery kid was there last night to get the doorknob. He's likely hiding there this very minute."

Red's eyes were bulging.

"My-y gosh!" he chattered. "And only ten minutes ago I—I was in the hayloft all a-lone, g-getting this coat. Maybe he was wa-atching me all the time."

Peg's face went thoughtful.

"Fellows, can you understand how a *boy* can be a peril to a community, like Scoop says?"

I slowly shook my head.

"I'm beginning to think," he proceeded, "that the only person who had anything to fear from the boy was the yellow man. Um—— Maybe if there *is* a kid, as we think, he's in trouble. Likely. I guess if we find him in the barn we won't rough-house him till we know what's what. Eh, fellows?"

"I hope we do find him," I put in. "I'd like to hear the story of why he was kept in the yellow man's trunk."

"You and me both," said Peg.

"I can't figure out why he hooked the cat," put in Red.

"And your doorknob," supplemented Peg.

"Yes, and I can't figure out what Scoop Ellery and Bill Hadley will say when they learn that the cat's gone blooey," I grimaced.

Then Peg and I went in to breakfast.

I've told you everything that happened to us, step by step, because it is Scoop's idea that the story will be more enjoyable to you if you see the mystery through our eyes and share in our bewilderment.

Maybe, though, you are snickering up your sleeve thinking you know all about what was in the trunk. You may even be saying to yourself in a superior way, weren't we the boobs not to catch on it was only the yellow cat in the trunk; and it isn't a transmigrated cat at all; and the whispering Mose heard was just a voice-throwing trick; and the yellow man's daggery look was just our imagination; and the frozen terror in his dead face means nothing at all; and like as not Red Meyers left his white doorknob on our

back porch and that is how Dad had it handy to tie on the end of the cord when he snitched the cat on us in fun; and the stinking breath in my face was just a part of my crazy jungle dream; and so on and so forth.

All right. If you think we weren't smart enough to consider all these things, just keep on thinking.

Maybe *you're* going to get a surprise!

CHAPTER VII

MORE RED PAINT

At the breakfast table Dad fired questions at us so fast and steady I wondered uneasily would he never run down talking about what happened at the hotel so I could corner him and make him own up if he knew anything about the white doorknob and the stolen cat. I suspected he was innocent. And it was pleasing to me when he said so. I knew he was telling the truth.

Getting up from the table he squinted at his watch.

"Um—— Seven-thirty. Think you'll be on hand by eight o'clock, Jerry?"

"Sure," I promised, speeding up on the corn flakes.

"You can tackle the office roof first. Red going to help?"

I nodded, thinking if I had to waste less time talking I could eat faster.

"He's waiting outside," I said, again bearing down on the accelerator.

"Yes," put in Mother, "and he looks like a free show. I bet Mrs. Meyers doesn't know he's gallivanting around the neighborhood in a swallow-tailed coat and a bathing suit. Shall I get the big mixing spoon for you to eat with, Jerry?"

"We're going to wear old clothes, so if we get daubed up it won't cut any figure," I explained.

"You can put on a pair of overalls," she instructed. "I'd be ashamed to have you go down the street looking like a callithumpian."

When Peg and I went outside, Scoop was there. He was scowling under the information Red had given him regarding the cat and white doorknob.

"You're a coupla dumb-bells," he fired at us, "to let the cat get away from you."

Peg bristled.

"Go ahead and bawl us out," he growled, his eyes narrowed. "Don't be backward. Tell us just what you think of us. We haven't any brains, so what you hand us won't hurt our feelings none. Just wade in and spit out what you think —*you wise guy!* Huh! You give me a pain."

Scoop cooled off.

"I tell you what we'll do, fellows: Peg and I will search the barn. Jerry, you and Red beat it for the brickyard. We'll come along as soon as

we find out if there is any one hiding in the barn."

Red and I mogged it down the street, the people rubbering at his crazy outfit and giggling. This put him in high feather. No one noticed me in my patched overalls. I wondered if I could get him to let me wear the derby or swallow-tailed coat if I gave him an extra dime out of the five dollars we were going to earn. He's a good scout, Red is. He said I could wear the derby for nothing.

Dad grinned when we came to the office door and saluted.

"Right on time," said he.

"Aye, aye, sir," I returned in imitation of the Cap'n, giving another salute.

"I've put part of the paint in this pail," he proceeded. "All mixed and ready to spread. The rest is in that big can. Start at the peak and work down. One side at a time. You can finish the eaves by standing on the stepladder. Get me?"

"Aye, aye, sir," I grinned, tipping my derby forward and winking.

He made a good-natured pass at me, but I ducked.

"*I'll* feel like doing some 'aye-aying' if you

mess up things around here like old Paddy did. Well, gang, are you all set? If so, let's go."

Gripping the paint pail and brush, Red and I meandered up the wabbly stepladder to the roof. Everything was lovely until he got entangled in the tails of his coat and dropped the brush. But with his coat-tails tied up, like a horse's tail, there was no more danger in that quarter.

Sozzling the brush in the paint, we started in.

"You're doing fine," complimented Dad when we had a spot painted about the size of the metal washtub I accidentally dropped into Mother's cistern, which is a wonder to her to this day where did it go to. "Keep up the good work," he added, and went into the office whistling: "Throw out the Life Line."

That's another fine thing about Dad: when he has me do something for him he doesn't stand around and *boss*. He knows the difference between *telling* a fellow how to do a thing and *bossing* him while he's doing it. Some boys' dads act kind of dense in that respect. They seem to like to stand around and yell, now don't do this and don't do that, and what did you do that for? and now look what you've gone and done, you clumsy mule, and a lot more discouraging and humiliating truck. Nagging talk like that makes

a fellow feel cheap. And if he has any spunk inside of him he gets ugly and the work isn't fun but drudgery.

Because Dad had *confidence* in me, and wasn't constantly in sight to yell out if I made a miscue, I did the best job I knew how.

Presently the roof was all painted. He said it was the snail's eyebrows, and patted us on the shoulders. This made us feel good. Like we were of some consequence. When a fellow does his best he doesn't kick any if he gets handed a little praise.

"Now," said Dad, "you can take the rest of the paint and spread it on the Cap'n's roof. I might not be here when you get back with the stepladder, so I'll pay you the five bones in advance. I know I can trust you to do a first-class job," and he handed me a five-dollar bill.

We were starting away with our paint and other truck when Scoop and Peg came into the brickyard on the run.

"What do you—think we found—in the barn?" panted Scoop.

"The boy?" I inquired excitedly.

"Nope. The yellow cat."

I stared and almost dropped the paint brush onto my bare feet.

"Honest," declared Scoop, reading the doubt in my face. "It was shut in the chicken-feed box. Say, isn't this the jumbledest mess of circumstances you ever heard tell of?"

"You didn't find any trace of the boy?" Red put in eagerly.

Scoop shook his head.

"Nothing but the cat," he stated.

"Where is it?" I inquired.

"On your back porch nailed in a cracker box. We wanted to put it in the basement but your ma wouldn't let us."

We headed for Zulutown, walking four abreast, each one busy with his own thoughts.

"Yes, it's a queer jumble," Scoop said reflective-like, as we piked along. "Peg and I can think of no *reason* why the white doorknob was exchanged for the cat, and the latter shut in the chicken-feed box. Usually things are done with a reason. Maybe——"

"Have you told Bill?" I put in.

Scoop shook his head.

"No; and we don't intend to. Do we, Peg?"

"We've talked it over," spoke up Peg, "and it's our opinion that we've got to keep the cat in our possession if we're going to clear up the mystery."

I was somewhat troubled under the thought was it good citizenship for us to go ahead on our own hook and not take Bill into our confidence.

Scoop scowled when I told him my thoughts.

"I guess you wouldn't let that trouble you, Jerry, if you had been down town with us this morning. We told Bill we'd be glad to help him solve the mystery and he gave us the hee-haw. Yes, sir, he laughed at us right on Main Street."

"He contends," said Peg, "that the only thing in the trunk was the yellow cat. And now that the yellow man has been turned over to the undertaker with a clean death certificate the matter is ended so far as he is concerned. At least that is the way he acted. He isn't interested in the cat. And right there is where he's asleep at the switch. Eh, Scoop?"

The other nodded.

"We figure the cat will enable us to clear up the mystery."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well, it was stole last night, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"*Why* was it stole?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. No one knows except whoever is the thief. But isn't it within reason

to suppose that having been stole *once* it is likely to be stole again? Peg and I think so. Only the next time it's stole we'll be on guard."

"To-night?" I said.

He nodded grimly.

We talked it over in detail, how we would return the white doorknob to the beam in the barn and tie the yellow cat to the tent pole. Then we would keep watch in pairs, lying in wait for the mysterious thief with flashlights and stout clubs.

We passed Mrs. Bowman's white cottage, only we didn't rattle sticks on the pickets of her old-fashioned front fence as usual because she was in the yard to stop us.

You will remember her as the candidate who cleaned up on Mrs. Meyers, as it were, and got herself elected president of the Stitch and Chatter Club. I wrote about it earlier in my story. She has the biggest pansy bed and the most dead husbands of any woman in Tutter. You never heard tell of a wife so unlucky with husbands. She has four all in a row in the city cemetery.

The "To Rent" sign was still tacked to her front porch column. And on the moment I recalled what Mother had said about her wanting to lease the house furnished so she could spend

the summer and fall with her married daughter in Kalamazoo.

Turning in next door I squinted critically at the Cap'n's low roof, which has two slants: a short, steep slant in front, and a long, gradual slant behind.

"We'll paint the front part first," I told Red.

Scoop giggled and produced his mouth organ.

"While you fellows are sozzling paint Peg and I'll slip onto the back porch and have some fun with the old boy."

A moment later he was bearing down hard on "Turkey in the Straw," his cheeks puffed out like ripe tomatoes. Peg stood beside him on the top porch step, whistling and spatting his hands.

Thump! thump! sounded the Cap'n's peg-leg on the kitchen floor. Lather covering his face, a razor gripped in his right hand, he came to the door just as Red and I were lugging the stepladder into position to get onto the roof at the lowest point.

"Avast thar, you pirates! Lay offen that chune; lay offen it," he thundered at Scoop and Peg. "Ding-bust your worm-eaten timbers! I'll scrape your humly decks with this razor if you don't pull anchor an' git out of here. Git,

neow!" and he made a kicking motion with his good foot.

"What's the matter, Cap? Haven't you got any pep this morning?" laughed Peg.

"Haven't I got any pep?" the other bristled. "Haven't I got any pep, you say? Gangway!" and he spun around on his peg-leg as much as ten times. "Course I've got pep! The ol' hull's jammed full of it. But I'm too busy this mornin' to monkey with you kids. Pull out of here neow. Git!"

Here I put in:

"We've come to paint your roof, Cap'n. Dad said he told you."

This brought the old man down from his high horse.

"Um—— I un'erstand; I un'erstand. Um—— That's fine. The ol' roof's bin takin' in water bad lately. Jest lay to an' go ahead. I kain't come out an' help none 'cause I'm busy gittin' ready to ship my pers'nal cargo over to Ashton on the noon train. Don't very of'en cruise out of teown on business. An' this is *important* business. Awful important. Kinda makes me all excited. Jest lay to an' do your roof paintin', Jerry. I'll come on deck after a bit an' look the job over an' see is it all right an'

proper. Neow, whar in thunderation did I put my razor? Ding-bust that razor——"

"It's in your hand," giggled Scoop.

The brown eyes went sheepish.

"Um—— So 'tis; so 'tis. I'm awful excited, b'ys. I've go to hurry neow. Um—— Where did I stow my towel? I had a towel. Yes, I did. Ever'thing I put down fur a second walks off——"

"It's under your chin, Cap," laughed Peg.

"Under my chin? Well, neow, so 'tis; so 'tis. Right under my chin. An' I was lookin' fur it like a' ol' gilly. Hee! hee! I must hurry neow," and he disappeared into the kitchen.

When Red and I were on the roof, he said:

"Wonder why the Cap'n is heading for Ashton?"

"Maybe he's got a gurl over there," I giggled, sloshing the paint around.

"Aw, shucks!" sputtered Red. "He's 'most sixty years old."

"What of it?" I argued, keeping up the joke I started. "There isn't any law, is there, saying a sixty-year-old man can't have a gurl?"

"A man that old ought to have better sense than to go chasin' after the gurls," he shot back at me.

During the next hour we worked hard and steady. It was getting hot as time on the roof. We were dead anxious to finish the job and join Peg and Scoop in the shade. Red stirred while I sloshed, then I stirred while he sloshed. We didn't get such an awful lot of paint on our clothes, but we did get a liberal coating on our bare feet.

"Turpentine'll take it off," said Red.

"Easy," I agreed.

He straightened and drained the sweat from his blistered face.

"I'm pretty near melted with this heavy coat on."

"Take it off," I grunted.

We were now working on the peak where the tile chimney punctures the roof. Red skinned out of the swallow-tailed coat and buttoned it around the tiles. It looked funny: like a short man, kind of, without a head.

Well, it must have been eleven-thirty when we finished.

Red squinted into the pail.

"Pretty near enough paint left over to cover a third roof," he said.

"You go down the stepladder and I'll hand it to you," I directed.

Instead, he let out a screech and pointed to the tile chimney.

"Gee-miny! I forgot my fancy coat."

Scoop and Peg got their eyes on the dressed-up chimney.

"Haw! haw! haw!" went Peg with his big mouth. Then he yelled: "Hey, Cap! There's a church deacon on the roof hugging your tile chim-ley."

This brought the Cap'n from the house in his shirt sleeves. He was all dressed up: Sunday pants and white tie and whiskers brushed and everything. I couldn't recall a time when I had seen him look so slick. Even his one shoe was polished.

"Git that thing deown," he bellowed, when he saw what we were laughing at. "Git it deown neow. I ain't goin' to have my chim-ley made into a neighborhood monkey show."

Red disliked the idea of climbing the slippery roof.

"Aw, it isn't doing any harm," he argued, his lips stuck out.

The Cap'n's face went grim. Getting a stick he started for the stepladder. I could tell from the way he was stepping it off with his peg-leg he meant business.

THE POOR CAP'N HADN'T THE PRESENCE OF MIND TO DODGE THE COMET'S TAIL.

"Git it deown neow," he thundered, "or I'll come up thar an' tan your hide, you young imp."

Red shot me an uneasy glance.

"Go up and take it down," I said. "What do you want to make him mad for?"

"Yes, and suppose I skid in the wet paint?" he growled.

"The roof isn't very steep," I argued. "If you step carefully you can manage it."

He got to the peak without any trouble. Unbuttoning the coat from the tile chimney he put it on. Then, of course, he had to act smart. That's Red Meyers for you! Every time.

Wavering on the ridge he sought to balance himself with his arms.

"Lookit, fellows," he screeched down at us, "the Human Fly," and with his chest punched up and his head thrown back he high-stepped it along the roof peak, imitating a tight-rope walker.

I began to have an anxious feeling. Like something was going to happen. It did. One of his feet slipped on the freshly-painted surface and quicker than you can say "Jack Robinson" he came skidding down the roof on the hind part of his pa's swallow-tailed coat.

Peg and Scoop were laughing fit to kill.

"Lookit! Lookit!" screeched Peg, dancing up and down. "The Human Fly has turned into a human flying fish."

I saw him coming at me feet first and jumped. Only it all happened so quickly I forgot to protect the pail of paint. He hit it. I'll say he did! Sixty miles an hour. The way he sent that pail of paint scooting through the air made it look like a rampageous comet with a bloody tail.

And here is the awful part: the poor Cap'n hadn't the presence of mind to dodge the comet's tail, and what was a white man one second, dressed up in Sunday clothes, was a red man the next—the paintiest, stickiest red man you ever set eyes on in all the days of your life.

Maybe you are laughing as you read this. A lot of people laughed when they heard about it. But we didn't laugh. Not on your life. What happened to Red was funny; but what happened to the Cap'n was a misfortune. I guess Mother and Dad would be ashamed of me all the rest of their lives if I ever laughed at an old man in trouble.

For a second or two I was scared dumb. We'd catch it now, was the thought that stood out in my mind. But he didn't give a roar and fly into

a rage as I imagined he would. His usual bluster and thunder had deserted him. He acted more like a scared kid than a man.

"Hel-lup! Hel-lup!" he gurgled, the paint dripping from his fingers and trickling from the end of his big warty nose.

Scoop was the first to collect his scattered senses. I heard him suck in his breath. Then:

"Keep your eyes shut, Cap'n," he cried, beating it into the kitchen where he got a towel. Very carefully he wiped around the old man's eyes.

"Open 'em," he said shortly.

The Cap'n blinked.

Scoop peered sharply into the brown eyes.

"Hurt any?" he inquired anxiously.

"No-o. But I'm in a' awful mess. Jest look at me! My clothes is ruined."

"Don't lose your grit," encouraged Scoop. "We'll get some turpentine and clean you up in a jiffy. Yes, sir, as shiny and bright as a new silver dollar."

"But you kain't clean up my clothes. My Sunday pants is ruined. All I got to wear is my every-day pants, an' I kain't wear my every-day pants to Ashton. No, I kain't. It wouldn't be right an' proper nohow. An' it's 'most train

time. I've got to go 'cause I've promised. An' I kain't go. Oh, you b'ys is jest got me in a awful fix."

"Shucks!" said Scoop. "Your every-day clothes are good enough to wear to Ashton. Absolutely. Go into the woodshed, Cap'n, and strip off your shirt. We'll see how quick we can get you cleaned up. Hey, Peg."

"Yes?"

"Beat it down to Pa's store and get the green jug just inside the back door. It's full of turpentine. Make it snappy."

" 'Tain't no use; 'tain't no use," put in the Cap'n.

"What ain't no use?"

"Me thinkin' of goin' to Ashton in my ol' clothes. It wouldn't be right an' proper nohow."

"Bosh!" said Scoop. "Anyone would think you were intending to get married in Ashton."

"I was a-plannin' to, mebby. An' neow I kain't, an' the lady is waitin' fur me an' expectin' me on the noon train."

Well, that put us dumb—with sagging jaws and bulging eyes. It was an awful shock to us to learn that the Cap'n was engaged to be married. I could hardly credit my ears. It was like being told that they had found a way to make

automobiles run on water instead of gasoline. I tried to picture him in my mind as having a wife; but I couldn't, any more than I could picture the garbage-hauler's sway-backed horse hitched up to Mr. Kaar's new white hearse. One seemed just as inconsistent to me as the other.

Scoop found his voice.

"Good night, nurse!" he screeched. " I guess you *are* in a pickle."

"It's all your fault," the Cap'n scowled. "You fellers up an' thrun the paint at me, you did. An' neow I kain't go to Ashton."

Scoop got back his business head.

"Who says you can't?" he put in crisply. "Of course you can. We'll clean you up and find clothes for you, somehow. Now, go into the woodshed, like I tell you, and we'll try scouring powder on you till Peg gets back with the turpentine."

Ten minutes later we were grouped about the Cap'n pouring turpentine onto his skin and rubbing. The woodshed floor was strewn with paint-splotched towels and rags.

At twelve-fifteen we knew it was no use. We never could get him polished up in time to catch the twelve-thirty train. We had his face and neck clean, but there was paint in his hair and whisk-

ers. It would take another hour to get him cleaned up thorough.

Scoop drew me into the kitchen and said:

"Jerry, have you got any money?"

"Five dollars," I returned, feeling of the bill in my pocket.

"Um—— I wonder how much it'll cost to send a telegram to Ashton?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well, don't you think we ought to fix it up for the Cap'n if we can? With his lady friend, I mean. He's always been good to us. And we kind of got him into this trouble, didn't we?"

"I guess so."

"We'll find out from him what the Ashton lady's name is and send her a telegram."

"And you want my five dollars to pay for it?"

"Somebody's got to pay for it. I guess, though, it won't take more than thirty-five cents."

"Thirty-five cents is a-plenty," I shot back at him.

When we returned to the woodshed Peg and Red were still rubbing. Scoop told the Cap'n what we were going to do.

"Calc'late as heow you owe it to me," he scowled, his eyes going resentful, "after the way you up an' thrun paint all over me."

"What's her name?" inquired Scoop.

"It's in a letter."

"Where is the letter?"

The knobby hands were fidgeting.

"I hain't goin' to let you go snoopin' into my pers'nal letters—"

"Where is it?" Scoop cut in firmly.

"I hain't goin'—"

"Yes, you are," declared Scoop. "If we're going to help you get square with the lady we've got to know all the circumstances. Where's the letter?"

"It's pers'nal—"

"We won't blab around what's in it."

The brown eyes were roving about the interior of the woodshed.

"Um—— Kain't I sot? My leg is gittin' stiff as a poker from standin' on it so long."

Peg brought a chair.

"The letter," Scoop reminded crisply.

"I furgot where I put it. Neow let me think——"

Scoop lost his patience.

"Good night!" he exploded. "You're a lulu. Fixing to marry a lady and can't even remember her name!"

"Well, I only seed it once in a letter," the

other returned unhappily. "She answered my ad," he explained.

"What ad?"

"My ad in the matrimonial magazine. I put an ad in tellin' how I would be willin' to consider matrimony with a refined lady of forty-fifty who had some means an' a sweet disposition——"

"My gosh!" squeaked Scoop, clawing at his hair like he was going to have a fit. His eyes were bulging.

The Cap'n got back some of his vanished temper.

"You needn't stare at me like I'm a' ol' fool an' ain't got no brains," he snapped. "I guess if it warn't all right an' proper to advertise fur a wife in the matrimonial magazines they wouldn't be no magazines doin' business fur men to advertise in who ain't got no wives. It was last week I got a letter from her. I answered it an' told her I'd be over to-day to git a marriage license if she was willin'."

"And you can't remember where you put the letter?" Scoop inquired.

"Neow let me think——"

"Maybe it's in the album with her picture."

"No. She hain't sent me her picture."

"And you haven't seen her in person?"

"No."

"And you don't know what she looks like?—whether she's short or tall or skinny or fat or beautiful or ugly?"

The Cap'n was beginning to look foolish.

"I was a-goin' over to-day to find out, only you-all up an' thrun paint on me, you did."

"Huh!" said Scoop, looking at the Cap'n with the same kind of an expression on his face that a storekeeper has who gets hung up with a crate of rotten eggs.

Presently he added:

"Well, if you can't tell us where the letter is, it's a cinch we can't send a telegram."

"Um—— Neow let me think. Did I put it in my top dresser drawer, or didn't I?"

"I'll look," offered Peg, starting for the bedroom on the run.

He came back with the needed letter and this is what Scoop read to us:

Ashton, Illinois, July 3.

Captain Boaz Tinkertop,
Tutter, Illinois.

DEAR MR. TINKERTOP:

I have carefully noted your advertisement in the current issue of THE HOME-MAKER, and if you are a man of sterling character, as you state,

and your intentions are wholly noble and honorable, I shall be pleased to have you come to Ashton to see me. It may develop that we will find a degree of pleasure in each other's society that will make possible a closer future relationship.

Sincerely,

(Miss) Dottie Pinkle.

P.S. I am a professional woman and you will find me staying temporarily at the Court Hotel.

Scoop put the letter in his pocket.

"All right," he said in a businesslike way. "I'll skin down town and send Miss Pinkle a telegram explaining the situation so she won't faint all over the lobby of the Court Hotel thinking she's been jilted. Anything special you want me to put into the message, Cap'n?"

"Nothin' except I'm awful sorry to disa'p'int her."

It was now too late to think of going home to dinner so Peg and Red agreed to cook dinner at the Cap'n's while Scoop and I attended to the sending of the telegram.

"We'll be back in half an hour," he promised as we set forth.

When we were in the street he snorted and scowled back at the Cap'n's house.

"The old gilly! Imagine a man his age putting an ad in a matrimonial magazine for a wife. If that wouldn't get a fellow's goat I don't know what would."

"It's kinda silly," I conceded.

"Silly is right. Huh! No one with good sense would write such an ad; or answer it, either. This Miss Pinkle must be as big a nut as he is."

"It's his scheme to find a wife with enough money to take care of him," I said.

"If she's got money why should she want to waste it on an old bat of a husband with a peg-leg?" he shot at me.

I couldn't answer that. It seemed to me, though, if *they* were satisfied with the arrangement it was none of our funeral. Some people do queer things, and for them to hook up through a matrimonial ad wasn't any queerer than a lot of other things I've known to happen.

Presently we turned in at the door of the Western Union office.

"We want to send a telegram to Ashton," Scoop informed the lady behind the long counter.

"Write it down, please," she instructed, handing us a pad of yellow telegram blanks.

He chewed the pencil and rolled his eyes cow-fashion.

"Um——" he said vacant-like. "What'll we tell her?"

"Write in the date," I suggested, "and maybe something will come to us."

Down went the date in the proper line.

"I've got an idea, Jerry," he laughed.

This is the message he wrote out:

Tutter, Illinois, July 11.

Miss Dottie Pinkle,
Court Hotel,
Ashton, Illinois.

Captain Boaz Tinkertop has bad case of TNIAP DER. Will see you as soon as he gets well.

A FRIEND.

I squinted hard and long at the TNIAP DER part of the message.

"What kind of a disease is that?" I inquired.

He giggled.

"Don't you tumble, Jerry? Hold the telegram to the light with the back side facing you."

I did.

TNIAP DER, as seen through the paper, was RED PAINT, only, of course, a few of the letters were hind side foremost.

Miss Mulliguy's eyes went big and startled when she read the message.

"Dear me!" she murmured. "I didn't know the Cap'n was ill. Is it catching?"

"He caught it on the fly from Red Meyers," Scoop said soberly.

"I hope it doesn't spread throughout town. What is it like?"

"Well," Scoop said reflective-like, "the first symptom is a very red face. And if your neck is red, too, and your hands, then you've got it bad."

"Does it itch?"

"No, but the Cap'n says it smarts."

When we tumbled into the kitchen Red and Peg were putting the dinner on the table. The Cap'n was busy at the sink, his face buried in a pan of suds. When he dried himself on the towel he looked almost white.

That afternoon we done out a washing, only we couldn't get the towels clean, even though we put kerosene into the suds. Our lineful of splotched towels looks as though we had been swabbing up after a murder.

We were putting the tub away when the kid who delivers telegrams rode his bicycle into the yard and knocked on the front door. It was a

telegram for the Cap'n. Scoop signed for it; then tore open the envelope and read the message aloud:

Ashton, Illinois, July 11.

CAPTAIN BOAZ TINKERTOP,
Tutter, Illinois.

Your telegram just received unintelligible. Will arrive in Tutter to-morrow morning to put on show there. Have an explanation to make.

(Miss) DOTTIE PINKLE DE MOZOBAL.

De Mozobal? I squinted over Scoop's shoulders at the telegram. My forehead went puckered. The name de Mozobal sounded familiar to me. Where had I heard it? For a few seconds I couldn't recall. Then the truth of the situation dawned upon me and I let out a squeaky yelp.

"It's the fat show lady," I screeched. "Don't you remember, fellows?—the Princess de Mozobal who weighs three hundred and ninety-five pounds and has her picture on our ash box?"

Everything was clear to me now. Just as clear as day. Peg had told us how the Ashton sheriff had been holding the show property under an attachment. That is how the fat lady happened to be staying at the Court Hotel. And with the

show stranded, and no money in her pocket, she was ready and eager to jump at the first chance that offered three square meals a day. That is why she had answered the Cap'n's matrimonial ad. She wanted a home. Somehow, with Mother in mind and Mrs. Meyers and a hundred other nice married ladies, it hurt me to think of what the fat lady had done. It sort of cheapened home-making. She was even worse than the Cap'n. *He* was foolish. *She* was scheming to take advantage of his foolishness.

The old man found his voice.

"Heh? What's that?" he cackled, looking into my face with startled eyes. "Did you-all say she weighs three hundred and ninety-five pounds? Did you-all say three hundred——"

I nodded.

"And she has three whopping big chins," I told him.

He went sick-looking, like a cat covered with molasses. I knew what was the matter. He had lost his hankering for a wife upon learning how big and fat the Ashton lady was.

Scoop gave the telegram a second reading.

"Um—— She'll be here in Tutter to-morrow morning. Expects you to make an explanation to her."

"Heh?" and the gingerbread eyes went wild.

"Says so right here in the telegram," maintained Scoop. " 'Have an explanation to make' is what it reads. She wants you to have the explanation all ready for her when she calls. I bet she's sore because you didn't show up. Yes, that's it. She's got a hunch you're trying to crawfish out of the matrimonial deal."

"I don't want her to come near me," screeched the Cap'n, the sweat pouring down his cheeks. "Great codfish! Three hundred an' ninety-five pounds! Jumpin' Jupiter! I hain't goin' to marry no side-show lady. I'll shet the door in her face, I will."

He was stomping up and down the room, his chin whiskers stuck out, his arms fanning the air.

"I won't marry her," he added. "She kain't make me marry her, nuther. I hain't goin' to have no human elly-fant for a wife. Not by a jugful."

He paused sharply and squinted into our faces.

"B'ys," he said in a wheedling voice, "I've allus bin your friend, hain't I?"

We nodded.

"An' I've allus stood up fur you an' helped you out of scrapes, hain't I?"

We nodded again.

"All right; then it's your turn neow."

"What's the idea?" said Peg.

"You've got to stand by me an' not let that designin' fat lady git me."

"Get you?"

"That is what she's comin' fur. I know! She'll make me marry her if you don't help me git rid of her."

"Good night!" exploded Scoop. "If you didn't want to marry her why did you write to her? And why did you have us send the telegram?"

"I jest didn't know, did I, how she is a side-show *fat* lady? Three hundred an' ninety-five pounds! Three thins! Oh, oh! This is awful!" and he mopped up the sweat with a handkerchief.

Scoop was scowling.

"I'm glad you're getting wise to what a monkey you've made of yourself. Huh!"

"You b'ys is got to help me."

"You don't deserve help."

"If you don't help me she'll git me jest as sure as shootin'."

He kept on coaxing us to stand by him.

"Look around here," Scoop commanded sharply.

"Yes?"

"If we help you this time, will you promise,

cross your heart, to cut out the crazy matrimonial magazine stuff?"

"Yes-s."

"All right, then. Um—— Looks to me like the thing for you to do is to get a relapse."

"A which?" asked the Cap'n, cupping his right ear.

"A relapse. You've got to get worse."

"Worse?"

Scoop gave a gesture of impatience.

"Cap'n, your head's as thick as one of Mr. Todd's bricks. Now get this: I telegraphed to your Ashton lady friend that you had a bad attack of TNIAP DER; and to-morrow, when she calls here with the preacher, you won't be able to get out of bed. See? This is going to be a very bad case. Quarantine signs on the house an' everything. TNIAP DER in big red letters. If she insists on coming into the yard you can let out a few groans. That'll help to send her kiting."

There was a lot more talk. Then we took a piece of white cardboard and red-lettered the quarantine sign:

TNIAP DER

Very Dangerous! Keep Out!

"We'll put the sign up to-morrow morning when the show pulls into town," planned Scoop.

It was getting close to supper time so we prepared to leave for home.

"We'll meet at Jerry's house when it gets dark," he added. "And don't forget, fellows, we need two flashlights and a couple of strong clubs."

This recalled to my mind the unsolved mystery of the yellow cat and the escaped peril.

On the moment I wondered uneasily what dangers, if any, lay ahead of us with the coming of darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PROWLING PERIL

MOTHER collared me when I streaked it into the kitchen through the back door.

"Why weren't you home for dinner?" she demanded.

"I've been painting tin roofs," I told her.

"You look it! Go down in the basement and take off those sticky overalls. I'll throw you some clean clothes. Haven't you had any dinner?"

I told about eating at the Cap'n's house.

"Well, after this, Jerry, when you take a notion to eat away from home please let me know about it so I won't keep dinner waiting."

"I might have 'phoned to you, only I didn't think of it," I admitted.

At the supper table Dad inquired:

"How did you come out at the Cap'n's?"

"The roof is all painted," I informed.

"Fine! Have any trouble?"

"No-o; only Red skidded."

"Off the roof?"

I nodded over the top of a hunk of buttered bread.

"Don't tell me he hurt himself!" Mother put in anxiously.

"No."

I decided not to tell everything that happened. We had promised the Cap'n to keep his secret; and if I spilled out about his misfortune it would open the way for questions that I might not be able to dodge.

"Oh, yes," put in Dad under a new train of thought, "I had a look at your yellow man this afternoon. Mr. Kaar is holding him at the undertaking parlors till the show people get here tomorrow. If they don't bury him the town'll have to."

"Yes," I said.

"Mother tells me you recovered your yellow cat."

"Yes," I said again.

"I wonder whose cat it is. Must belong to some local family. Better watch the 'lost' column in the *Daily Globe.*"

"Maybe it's the yellow man," I said, spearing a pickle.

"Think it's a case of transmigration, Jerry?"

"Well, it *could* be," I defended.

"Nonsense!" put in Mother. "It's just a cat."

Then she added:

"It appears to be a very smart cat. I was talking to it this afternoon and it seemed to know everything I said. Why do you keep it shut up?"

"Scoop says it's a clew and we don't want it to get away."

"Jerry, you're funny! What makes you think there is a mystery?"

"Well, what makes you think there isn't?" I countered.

"Lulu was over this afternoon. She tells me Bill is laughing up his sleeve at you imaginative boys."

The lady Mother mentioned is Bill's wife, who used to be Miss Lulu Skinner. She and Mother are great pals.

"Maybe *we'll* have a chance to do some laughing later on," is what I said; then I shut up and tended to my eating.

It made me hot, kind of, to learn that Bill was making fun of us. After all I'd done for him! Huh! He needed taking down a peg or two. And I told myself, with considerable satisfaction, that he *would* eat humble pie if we proved there

was a mystery by solving it right under his homely nose, as it were.

After supper I read in the *Tutter Daily Globe* about the yellow man dying of heart failure at the Commercial House. There was no reference to the trunk and cat. My name wasn't mentioned in the newspaper, either. It was disappointing. The wizard's name was mentioned twice. The newspaper said he had returned to Ashton to inform the show management of the Hindu billposter's death.

There was nothing in the "lost" column about a missing yellow cat. I didn't expect there would be. But I looked because Dad had suggested it.

One whole page was crammed full of pictures and big type telling about Colonel Swisher's mammoth and colossal aggregation of world wonders and premier performers, scheduled to arrive in Tutter the following morning. There was to be two continuous performances: afternoon and evening.

I read the show advertising carefully. Particularly the part about the "world's most beautiful and captivating fat lady, the celebrated Princess de Mozobal."

Red came over while I was reading the newspaper so I put it aside and we planned things for

the coming day. First we would hang around the Studebaker pasture until the show came in and unloaded. Then we would beat it for the Cap'n's so as to be on hand when the fat lady called. We didn't want to miss that. In the afternoon we would take in the show. Our plans ended there, unless maybe we could crawl under the tent for the evening performance.

The trees and houses were vanishing ghost-like into the early evening darkness when Peg and Scoop showed up. Each had a club and flashlight.

"I brought a club, too," informed Red, holding up a short broom handle.

"Two'll be a-plenty," said Scoop.

"Who's going to watch first?" I inquired.

"We'll draw cuts," he explained.

Red and I drew the two long matches.

"You can watch from nine till ten," planned Scoop. "Then Peg and I will watch till eleven. You can come on at eleven and watch till midnight. So on throughout the night. Get me?"

The clock in the living room donged once for eight-thirty. When it struck nine we went to the tent and tied the cat to the pole the same as on the preceding night. Then we switched off the tent light and sat two and two on the beds, talk-

ing in whispers about what already had happened and what was liable to happen. It kind of got on my nerves. Scoop seemed dead certain the mysterious thief would come back for the cat. And he instructed us carefully how to handle the flashlights and clubs.

"As soon as you *know* some one is untying the cat, flash on the lights and draw your clubs. It may turn out to be a boy; on the other hand it may prove to be a man. I don't know. Anyway, whoever it is, if he starts to run, land on his bean good and proper."

At ten o'clock Red and I laid down on the beds without undressing. No whispering now. The scheme was to make it silent in the tent like we were dead to the world.

It seemed like I had been asleep not more than five minutes when Scoop breathed into my ear that it was my second watch.

"Has anything happened?" I inquired.

"Not yet," he whispered back.

Red joined me near the entrance. I suspected from the way he edged up beside me he was half scared out of his wits. But he didn't crawfish. Red's a good kid.

It was deadly still without the tent; and black. The faintest sounds carried to our ears: the fall-

ing of a twig a few feet away; the scampering of a mouse on the cement sidewalk. Once an owl hooted in the distance. A lonesome-like hoot. It gave me the shivers.

The minutes dragged along. I felt myself nodding. It was hard to keep awake. The silence and darkness acted as weights on my eyelids.

Suddenly Red's fingers tightened on my wrist. This signal put me wide awake.

"I heard something, Jerry."

From out of the darkness came a faint pat! pat! pat! Footfalls. On the grass.

My hand tightened around the club. And my other thumb felt for the flashlight snap. There was a fearful throbbing in my nerves as I braced myself ready to spring.

Pat! pat! pat!

Some one was walking stealthily around and around the tent. Maybe in a twenty-foot circle. On tiptoes. In my jungle dream the tiger had skulked around and around my campfire. I realized now that the prowler's actual footfalls had penetrated into my mind while I was asleep. That is what brought on the dream.

It kept up for maybe ten minutes. A steady pat! pat! pat!

Then silence. Deep. Deadly.

At midnight we awakened Peg and Scoop.

"He'll come back," opinioned Scoop when I whispered to him about the footfalls.

But darkness carried through until dawn and contrary to his prediction we heard no more of the mysterious visitor.

Scoop was disappointed.

"You hadn't ought to be," reasoned Peg in his steady way. "The footfalls Jerry and Red heard prove there *is* somebody hiding in the neighborhood. We're on the right track. Absolutely. Sooner or later the prowler'll fall for our bait."

"Meaning the cat?" I put in.

He nodded.

"It's just a matter of time," he maintained. "We'll watch again to-night; and we'll keep on watching till the mystery is solved."

I couldn't go to sleep after that. My mind was too busy. A hundred conflicting thoughts kept whirling around and around in my head.

You probably will agree with me that it was a strange and bewildering situation. An unknown prowler was at large in the neighborhood. We suspected it was the mysterious boy: the "peril" that had escaped from the yellow man's trunk.

But where was he hiding days? And why was

it necessary for him to keep in hiding? What was his game? How did the yellow cat figure in?

Not for an instant did I suspect, or did the others suspect, that the fat lady's appearance in Tutter would lend further complications to the adventure. And I don't want you to get the idea that we were asleep at the switch, either. Not on your life!

As Scoop said afterwards, no one could have guessed what was going to happen. He is dead right there.

CHAPTER IX

PRINCESS DE MOZOBAL

COLONEL SWISHER'S show pulled into town that morning between nine and ten o'clock—a clattering procession of scrawny, panting horses and shabby, rickety wagons driven by red-faced roughnecks who looked as though they needed to get better acquainted with soap and water. I hate swearing. And these bums were the awfulest swearers and tobacco chewers I ever seen. It was disappointing. I had expected to see something classy and here was a lot of trash.

"*Some* aggregation of world wonders," ridiculed Scoop, as we watched the greasy drivers unload their wagons in the Studebaker pasture.

I gave a disgusted nod, thinking to myself that whoever got up Colonel Swisher's show advertising wasn't particular how much he stretched the truth.

"Have you seen anything of the fat lady?" Scoop inquired.

I hadn't.

"Let's go over there where Red and Peg are helping spread out the tent," he suggested. "Maybe the Princess is parked in that big red wagon."

The wagon, we learned, was loaded with rolls of painted canvas and tent poles.

"Howdy, gang," said the driver in a friendly way. He seemed to be younger than the others and less of a dirty bum.

"Howdy," returned Scoop.

"Comin' to the show this afternoon?"

"Maybe," said Scoop.

"Atta-boy! Bring along all your folks. We need the jack. Ain't had a pay day in two weeks. Um—— You don't appear to be busy just now: Suppose you git up there on the load and hand me a few of them short poles."

"Sure," complied Scoop, quickly shinning up the side of the wagon.

I stood watching.

"Putting on a good show?" Scoop inquired after a moment.

Right away I pricked up my ears. He had something up his sleeve. I could tell from the quizzing tone of his voice. Very likely it was his scheme to pump the man. He's good at that.

I understood now why he had been so willing to go to work.

"Sure thing, we're puttin' on a good show," bragged the driver.

"Any elephants?"

"One," and the man laughed coarsely.

Scoop straightened and rubbered in all directions.

"I don't see it."

"You ain't lookin' in the right place."

"I guess you're kiddin'," said Scoop.

The man grinned good-naturedly.

"The 'elephant' I refer to is a fat lady," he chuckled. "She's puttin' up at the hotel."

Scoop's narrowed eyes met mine.

"Um—— So one of your attractions is a fat lady, eh?"

"Yep."

"And you say she's stopping at the Commercial House?"

"Yep. No ordinary cook-tent chuck registers with that dame. Classy, I'll tell the world! When Her Majesty comes onto the lot you'd think from the way she looks at us we were hunks of mud and she hated to step on us and get her shoes dirty. Traveled with Ringling's a few

years ago when she was fatter. Swelled her head, kinda. Speed up, kid; speed up."

Scoop juggled the show truck around.

"Did you know the Hindu who died in Tutter night before last?" was his next question.

"I knew him by sight."

"Did he have any pets?"

"Not that I know of."

"You never noticed him playing with a big yellow cat?"

"Naw."

"Maybe he kept it in a box out of sight; or in his trunk."

"Didn't know he had a trunk. Hand me those long poles—and for the love of Mike lay offen the gab. A li'l' pep now. Um—— That's the proper speed. Keep it up. You've got good muscles, kid."

Scoop worked in silence for a few minutes.

"How long has the Hindu been with your show?"

"Two-three weeks."

"Did Colonel Swisher hire him?"

"Of course."

"To post bills?"

"Sure. Bill posting was his trade."

At this point a burly man with a drooping mustache came heavily to the wagon and bellowed:

"Who gave you orders to dump that truck here? Git over there on the canvas where you belong. Step lively now."

Scoop quickly scrambled down from the wagon and followed the man with probing eyes.

"That bossy guy must be Colonel Swisher," he said in an undertone.

"Some one ought to 'swish' a donnick on his bean," I growled.

If there's anything that makes me hot it's to see one man bully another just because he has some authority.

Scoop's face took on a thoughtful expression.

"Um—— I'd like to ask him a few questions."

"Who?" I inquired.

"Colonel Swisher. I bet he knows who the Hindu is and what show he was with before he came to this outfit."

"What makes you think he was connected with another show?" I put in.

"Gosh, Jerry! Don't you ever use your head for anything besides a hat-rack? Huh! You surely weren't asleep when the driver told us that the Hindu was a professional billposter. And

they don't employ billposters in shooting galleries and laundries, do they? Of course he was with a show. And if we find out *what* show it will help us get at the bottom of the mystery. Absolutely. We can then write to the manager and inquire if a boy came up missing from the show about the time the Hindu disappeared. And we can tell in the letter about the yellow cat."

On the instant I went dizzy, kind of. It seemed to me that Scoop was turning our plans upside down. That morning he had agreed with Peg that the way to solve the mystery of the prowling peril was to watch nights in my tent. And now he was chasing off on a new angle.

When I put my scattered thoughts into words he replied:

"You've got me dead wrong, Jerry. Not for a second do I intend to drop the night watching. No, sir-e! That is important. But we'd be ninnies, wouldn't we, to refuse to follow up the mystery from another angle if we had the chance?"

Here Peg and Red came on the gallop.

"Where you heading for?" panted Red, hitching at his belt.

"Up town," informed Scoop.

The newcomers listened with open ears while he gave them an account of our conversation.

There was a reflective silence.

"I think," said Scoop out of his thoughts, "that one of us ought to picket the undertaking parlors."

"What for?" I inquired quickly.

"Well, Mr. Kaar is holding the Hindu's body in his undertaking parlors for burial instructions, isn't he?"

"Yes," I admitted, remembering what Dad had told me.

"And isn't Colonel Swisher the man to give the needed instructions?"

I tumbled.

"You think the show manager will call at the undertaking parlors and sign the burial papers and tell what the Hindu's full name is and his age and everything?"

Scoop nodded.

"It's important that one of us be there to listen in," he stated.

"Why don't *you* do the picketing?" put in Peg. "Mr. Kaar lives next door to your folks. He'll be less likely to tell you to beat it than he would one of us."

"That's a good suggestion," Scoop returned slowly. "Um—— Yes, I guess I better handle the job. Maybe Mr. Kaar will help me get a line on the Hindu through the show manager if I tell him how we're trying to be good citizens. He's a fine man, only I've always kept away from him because I imagined his hands smelt of dead people."

He paused and looked into Peg's eyes, then into mine.

"You two fellows can beat it for the Cap'n's," he directed. "Get him into bed, if he isn't already there, and put up the quarantine sign."

"And then what?" I inquired.

"Make it your business to see that the fat lady doesn't get into the house. I'll join you as soon as I can."

"Suppose we can't keep her out?"

"Shucks! You've got to. We promised. Show her the quarantine sign and let her think that TNIAP DER is some awful disease that she is liable to catch if she comes too close."

"We'll do the best we can," I promised.

Here Red put in:

"What am I to do?"

"You better come with me," advised Scoop. "I might need you."

Red's face went worried.

"Aw, I don't want to go in the undertaking room where the dead man is," he fumbled.

Scoop grinned.

"You can wait outside," he said, putting his arm on the other's shoulder.

Shortly after that we separated. Scoop and Red followed River Street into town while Peg and I took a short-cut around by the cement mill, crossing the canal on the switchtrack trestle.

Presently we tumbled pell-mell into the Cap'n's yard. Bounding up the steps of the kitchen porch Peg turned the doorknob.

"Locked," he said, giving the door a shake.

I squinted in through a porch window.

"There's a lot of chairs and truck piled against the door on the inside," I told him.

"See if the front part of the house is locked up," he directed.

A moment later I came back on the run and told him that it was.

"Do you suppose he's skinned out?" I inquired anxiously.

Peg shook his head and yipped:

"Ca-ap! *Hey, Ca-ap!*"

I took another squint into the kitchen through the porch window.

"Open the door and let us in," bellowed Peg, pounding on the panels with his fists.

About to turn from the window, I was held to a steady and excited gaze into the kitchen when I observed a trapdoor raising in the center of the floor. Inch by inch. Presently a knot of gray hair came into view; then a pair of familiar gingerbread eyes.

"Is she out thar, b'ys?" the Cap'n inquired in a voice that came to us through the closed window like a hollow whisper.

"No," I yelled back, shaking my head.

"Open the door," commanded Peg.

The old man came slowly from the cellar and removed the barricade.

"What's the idea of locking us out?" growled Peg when we were in the kitchen.

"I jest didn't intend to, b'ys; but when I got her note I went plum scared out of my wits. I did fur a fact. Looked to me like the only way to escape her was to stow myself in the cellar whar she couldn't git her hands on me."

Fumbling in his vest pocket he produced a bit of crumpled paper.

"It's a note I got sent to me 'bout nine-thirty," he explained. "A b'y from the hotel brought it."

Peg took the paper from the pottering fingers. Squinting over his shoulder I read:

Commercial House, Tutter, Illinois.

DEAR MR. TINKERTOP:

Have just arrived in Tutter. In case it will be inconvenient for you to come immediately to the hotel I shall make it a point to see you in your home this morning between eleven-thirty and twelve o'clock. As stated in my telegram, I feel that an explanation is in order.

Sincerely,

(Miss) DOTTIE PINKLE DE MOZOBAL.

"Well," Peg said shortly, "I guess the old gurl means business."

"She hain't a-goin' to git me," screeched the Cap'n, starting down through the trapdoor.

"Hey!" cried Peg, darting forward. "Come out of there and get into bed."

"I'm goin' to hide in the cellar, I be."

"Come on. It's eleven-fifteen and we haven't time to monkey. She'll be here in ten or fifteen minutes. Scoop gave us orders to put you to bed."

"I deon't want to go to bed, I deon't," the Cap'n rebelled. "It's safer deown cellar, so 'tis."

"Nix," said Peg.

His persistence won out.

"Now," he said, as he tucked the sheet under the scowling invalid's paint-brush chin, "let's hear you groan."

"I hain't needin' to groan. Fur why have I got to groan?"

"You must practice up so you'll be prepared to spill a few death gurgles in case the fat lady takes a notion to wedge herself in through the front door."

"I kain't groan if I hain't got nothin' to groan about."

"You'll have something to groan about if she gets her mitts on you," Peg said grimly.

The old man promptly came out of the bed.

"I'm goin' deown cellar, I be."

"No you aren't. Get back under the sheet. Lay still. You're sick."

"I hain't nuther sick."

"Yes, you are. You've got white bumps all over your face."

"It's whar you rubbed me too hard."

"Rats! It's TNIAP DER. You've got it bad. Now quit kicking or I'll tie your peg-leg to the bedpost."

"Cats an' codfish! I hain't got no faith in this

red paint scheme of your'n. It's plumb nonsense. Git away from me."

"It's a good scheme," defended Peg. "Now let's hear you groan. Pucker up like this and go: 'O-h-h-h-h-h'!"

The scowling invalid sullenly puckered.

"Fair," said Peg without enthusiasm. "Now, do it over again, and put a little pep into it."

They didn't need me in the bedroom to direct the rehearsal, so I beat it for the woodshed, where our quarantine sign was drying. Getting a hammer and tacks, I soon had the sign in place on the front door. The big red letters showed up swell.

Presently Peg came onto the porch and gave it the once-over.

"The old boy's forgotten his matrimonial grief," he giggled.

"Asleep?" I inquired, picking a dead spider out of the sign's red "K."

"No. I salvaged a last year's almanac and he's figuring out how many full moons we had."

We were sitting side by each on the top porch step when Spider Phelps skidded around the street corner in his new taxicab. It is a made-over flivver with a top-heavy body.

Peg jumped to his feet.

"I suspect," said he, "that the Princess has arrived to grab off her matrimonial prize."

"I suspect you're right," I agreed, noticing how the back part of the taxicab body sagged down.

Jamming on the brakes, Spider drew up in a cloud of dust and exercised his Klaxon.

"Hey!" he yelled to us. "Tell the Cap'n she's here."

"What's that?" I yipped back at him, acting innocent like a cat on the outside of a pet canary.

He jabbed his left thumb at the bungalow end of the taxicab outfit and lengthened his face mysteriously.

"A lady to see the Cap'n," he explained, giving me a wink.

Here the taxicab door swung open and a round face beamed at us.

"Please tell Mr. Tinkertop that I would prefer to have him come here as it isn't convenient for me to leave the car," spoke the visitor in a pleasing, dignified voice.

"Yes'am," I managed to say.

"He is expecting me," the lady added in the same dignified tone, and gave me her name.

"He—he— The Cap'n is quarantined and isn't allowed to leave the house," I fumbled. Of

course I didn't want her to tumble that four boys were responsible for the quarantine and not the Tutter health officer.

Spider's eyes bulged when I pointed to the sign on the front door.

"Smallpox?" he inquired shortly, craning his long neck like a mud turtle.

"TNIAP DER," I informed him.

"Never heard of it," said Spider, putting out his neck another notch or two.

I was now regarding the fat lady closely. Curious-like. Gee, she was pretty, kind of! Honest. Maybe forty years of age with dimpled cheeks the color of ripe peaches. Just like a young girl. Her blue eyes were protected by heavy black lashes. They were the *talking* kind of eyes, if you know what I mean. There was a warm rose tint to her lips that reminded me of Dad's fancy line of fireplace brick. Her hair was golden like corn silk. Yes, sir, she was pretty much of a swell-looker.

But *fat!* Say, she filled the whole back seat of the taxicab. I wondered to myself how did she ever manage to get in through the narrow door.

"What kind of a disease is TNIAP DER?" Spider wanted to know.

I remembered what Scoop told the lady at the Western Union office.

"The first symptom is a very red face," I said gravely. "And if your neck is red, too, and your hands, then you've got it bad. Usually on the second day your face breaks out in little white bumps."

"Catchin'?"

"The Cap'n caught it on the fly from Red Meyers."

The Princess regarded me sharply.

"What is the meaning of all this nonsense?" she demanded impatiently.

"It isn't nonsense," I defended.

"I have my own personal opinion as to that," she retorted. "Now run into the house, like a good little boy, and assure Mr. Tinkertop it will be *perfectly safe* for him to come here for a minute or two. I don't intend to *eat him.*"

Little boy! I went hot. And I had a notion to spit out a mouthful of sass and tell her if she *did* try to eat the Cap'n she'd likely get the surprise of her life and a few broken teeth when she bit into his left leg, which is the wooden one.

But I didn't say what I felt like saying.

"He's in bed and mustn't leave the house," I growled.

She gave me another shrewd look. A probing look. As though she were dissecting my mind and knew its contents as well as I did myself. I wondered uneasily did she suspect we were faking her on the quarantine business.

"Are you a relative of the—er—afflicted gentleman?" she purred in a put-on honey-and-cream voice.

"Just a friend," I said, wondering was she making fun of me or was she mad.

"And the other boy?" she followed up, indicating Peg who was draped against a porch column with a "nobody-at-home" look on his face. "Is he a relative?"

"He's a friend, too," I explained.

The repressed look deepened in her eyes and she laughed in a queer jerky way.

"Really, I consider Mr. Tinkertop is to be congratulated in having two such *assiduous* friends."

She got my goat, kind of, with all that dictionary gab. Assiduous? I scratched my head. What did it mean, anyhow?

Maybe I looked dumb. I don't know. Anyway, I'll own up that I was tickled pink when she shifted her eyes from my face to the back of Spider's dome.

"Mr. Chauffeur," she purred, "please release

the Red Crown and follow trail twenty-three back to the hotel before we get a carburetorful of TNIAP DER germs."

As the taxicab ground its teeth and shivered into motion she waved her fat hand at me.

"Tra-la-la, little boy. Hope you don't catch the TNIAP DER *on the fly* from Mr. Tinkertop."

Peg was giggling fit to kill.

"Hello, little boy," he hooted at me. "Tra-la-la, little boy."

I guess when I faced him on the front porch my eyes were flashing. Anyway, I know I was good and fiery inside.

"One more 'tra-la-la' out of you, Peg Shaw," I hissed, my hands done up in hard knobs, "and I'll put a crook in your snoot that'll make your face look like the map of Italy after an earthquake."

He had laughed so hard he was almost out of wind.

"How do you do it?" he gurgled.

"Do what?" I snapped back.

"Make such a hit with the ladies? Haw! haw! haw!"

Probably a scrap would have been pulled off then and there if a cackling voice hadn't drew our attention to the cottage doorway.

"Hey!" and the Cap'n pottered onto the porch in his long white nightshirt. "Um—— Kain't find 'October,' " he fretted, fumbling with the almanac. "Ding-bust your worm-eaten hull," he snorted at Peg, "fur why did you-all tell me it was a' almanac when it's jest part of a' almanac? They hain't no 'October' page in it, they hain't. 'October' is clean tore out, so 'tis."

"Git back in the house," shrieked Peg, flourishing his arms like it was a frisky hen and chickens he was shooing out of a choice flower bed.

"They hain't no 'October'——"

"Git inside," Peg repeated sharply, giving the pottering old man a lift toward the open door, "and dress."

The brown eyes went warm and tickled.

"Then I hain't got to anchor in bed no more an' be sick with the red paint disease?"

Peg shook his head.

"You're completely cured," he laughed.

The Cap'n swayed in the direction of the open doorway. Then, under a more complete recollection of things, paused and turned his eyes on us.

"Is she bin here, b'ys?" he breathed.

"Yep," said Peg.

"An' you got rid of her fur me?"

Peg nodded.

A hand stole out.

"B'ys," said the relieved old gentleman, "I hain't never goin' to furgit how nobly you've stood by me. Yes, sir, you're good b'ys, you be, an' mebby some day I'll have a chance to show my 'preciation fur what you've done."

Following a general hand-shaking, Peg giggled in my direction.

"Cap," he began, "I don't want you to have any hard feelings toward Jerry, but he sure did try his prettiest to cut you out."

Dog-gone *him!* I made a pass at his tantalizing mug, but he ducked down the porch steps, bumping into Scoop and Red who came up on the run.

Gee-miny! With the three of them rolling in a heap at the foot of the steps all I could see was arms and legs with a sprinkling of freckles and red hair.

Scoop scrambled to his feet, massaging a damaged ear.

"Good night!" he screeched at Peg. "What's the idea of all the rough-house?"

As though in answer to the question the Cap'n let out a happy "Tra-la-lum, tra-la-lum, tra-la-lum-lum-lum," and with a snap! snap! snap! of

his fingers and thumbs started to wind up and unwind in one of his dizzy dances.

And right there on the front porch, in broad daylight, with his nightshirt on!

Red's eyes bulged.

"Has he gone crazy?" he gasped.

"He's celebratin'," giggled Peg.

"Yes," I put in, "he's happy because we outtricked the fat lady."

"Tell me about it," Scoop requested eagerly.

"Let's corral the Cap'n first," grinned Peg, "and steer him into port."

We were still talking about the fat lady's visit to Zulutown when the noon whistles let loose.

"Who's going to stay with the Cap'n?" inquired Scoop as the four of us prepared to leave for home.

No one spoke up.

"I think one of us should stay and do guard duty," the leader added. "It's the only safe plan. We *think* the fat lady has been scared away; but we don't *know* for sure. Maybe all she's waiting for is an unguarded field so she can swoop down on the Cap'n and lug him off to a marrying place."

"I'll stay," offered Red, "if Jerry'll stop in and tell Ma."

I promised.

Presently the three of us were hotfooting it down the street.

"Did you find out anything at the undertaking parlors?" I inquired of Scoop.

A sharper light came into his eyes.

"I had the right dope, Jerry."

"Fine!" I said by way of encouragement.

"The Hindu *was* with another show before he hired out to Colonel Swisher. Ringling Brothers. He told Mr. Kaar. Now if we can find out how to address a letter so it will reach the manager of Ringling Brothers I bet we'll learn something important."

I laughed.

"The fat lady can tell you how to address the letter. She used to travel with Ringling Brothers."

Scoop and Red stood guard at the Cap'n's that afternoon while Peg and I went to the show. It was punk. Nothing but a shoddy side-show. The only good act was the wizard's. We sure did get stung. I wished afterwards I had spent my two bits for Eskimo Pies.

A thing that put us guessing was the absence of the fat lady. She wasn't in the show tent. We looked and looked. When we asked one of

the showmen about her he said she was indisposed. That didn't put us any the wiser because neither of us knew for sure what indisposed meant.

As soon as the show was over we beat it for Zulutown, thinking that possibly she had stolen a march on Scoop and Red. But everything was lovely at the Cap'n's house.

Evening came. Scoop and Red decided not to go to the show after hearing from us how punk it was. We remained with the Cap'n until nine-thirty. Then we went to the tent and watched in hourly shifts throughout the balance of the night. Again we were visited by the mysterious prowler between eleven and midnight. Peg woke us up. For ten-twenty minutes we heard the stealthy pat! pat! pat! Around and around the tent. Then silence.

It gave us the creeps. Scoop had breakfast with me the following morning. While we were eating the telephone bell rang. It was Bill's wife. She and Mother visited for several minutes. I didn't pay much attention to the conversation.

Presently Mother came to the table.

"What a disgrace to the town!" she sputtered, sugaring her coffee a second time.

"Some one else turn into a yellow cat?" inquired Dad.

"Oh, it's that awful show outfit! I told Lulu yesterday Bill never should have allowed them inside the city limits. She says he's so crabby this morning she can hardly live with him. He didn't get a wink of sleep last night. The trouble all started when Colonel Swisher skipped town with the money he took in yesterday. The show truck left here is plastered with mortgages and will likely be auctioned off by the sheriff. There was some awful fighting among the showmen. Bill arrested seven of them. This morning he turned them loose on condition that they get out of town within an hour. The performers and freaks left on the six-thirty train for Chicago."

Following breakfast we got together at Red's house and headed for Zulutown. The Cap'n was washing his breakfast dishes. 'Maybe you think he wasn't tickled when he learned from us that the fat lady had invested some of her jack in a Chicago railroad ticket and was fast piling up the miles between herself and Tutter.

"Calc'late as heow I've learnt a good lesson, b'ys," he said soberly, as he cleaned the smudge from his peg-leg with the dish rag. "Yes, sir,

I've learnt a good lesson. No more advertisin' fur a wife fur me."

We were still talking about the fat lady when flying footsteps sounded on the kitchen porch.

It was Mrs. Bowman.

"I saw you boys over here," she said breathlessly, "and I came to see if one of you will take this telegram to the Western Union office for me. Give it to Carrie Mulliguy and ask her please to send it to my daughter in Kalamazoo *right away*. Here's a two-dollar bill. You can take a dime out of the change and buy some candy."

Scoop accepted the paper slip and the money, promising to attend to the errand immediately.

"Come along, Jerry," he invited.

"We had to copy the message onto a yellow telegram blank. It was all about how Mrs. Preeny, the hotel housekeeper, had gotten a tenant for Mrs. Bowman, and the latter was intending to leave for Kalamazoo on the morning train, so the tenant could have immediate possession.

At nine-thirty Spider Phelps came with his flivver and drove the Cap'n's excited neighbor to the depot. At ten o'clock the taxicab again drew up in front of the white cottage. Spider unstrapped a big trunk from the car's running board

and dragged it into the house. Returning to the taxicab he opened the door.

An arm came out. A big arm. My eyes bulged. *That arm looked familiar!*

Then came a head of corn-colored hair and a pair of broad shoulders.

It was the Princess!

Well, I suppose we looked like ninnies as we gaped at the new tenant. It took a lot of pulling and tugging to get her through the door of the taxicab. Spider got up a sweat. But between them they managed it.

"Thanks, lady," he said politely, mopping his forehead and pocketing the greenback she gave him.

Scoop was the first to recover his voice.

"It's her scheme to make the Cap'n marry her whether he wants to or not," said he, letting a hard, ugly look come into his narrowed eyes. That's why she's moved in next door: so she can see everything that goes on around here. She knows that sooner or later he'll appear; and when he does she intends to nab him."

There was a tense silence.

"Fellows," he added grimly, "are we going to be quitters and let her get the Cap'n? Or are we going to *fight?*"

"Didn't we promise the Cap'n we'd stand by him?" Peg countered in his steady, determined way.

Scoop nodded.

"Well," said Peg, "there's your answer. I, for one, am not going to let no side-show lady clean up on *me*."

"Me, neither," I put in hotly.

"Nor me," came doggedly from Red.

CHAPTER X

THE WALTZING HEN

It was Saturday morning when the Princess de Mozobal moved into Mrs. Bowman's furnished cottage next door to Cap'n Tinkertop. Sunday came, then Monday morning, and she was still there. And what put a worry into us was her apparent determination to stick where she was till she accomplished her purpose. Yes, sir, we could see she was bound and determined to make the Cap'n marry her; and the big idea in parking herself next door was to watch what was going on and shape her plans to outwit us. We talked it over and came to that conclusion. But with all our talking we could think of no scheme for getting rid of her. We seemed to have run out of schemes just when we needed one the most.

Contrary to our suspicions and beliefs she didn't give us a great deal of attention. That put me guessing. I couldn't figure it out. I thought, like Scoop said, that she would be constantly peeking through Mrs. Bowman's fancy

IT TOOK A LOT OF PULLING AND TUGGING TO GET HER THROUGH THE DOOR.

window curtains on the Cap'n's side of the house and squinting at us from the white cottage's front and back porches. But she didn't. If anything she avoided looking our way.

This unexpected and puzzling attitude of the new tenant's fired the Cap'n's distrust.

"Deon't let her disint'rest fool you, b'ys," he told us, furiously wagging his head. "It's all put on, so 'tis. Yes, sir, she's schemin' to git me. An' she will, jest as sure as shootin', if you up an' git careless."

"Don't worry," Scoop returned confidently. "It'll take some one smarter 'an a circus lady to pull the wool over *our* eyes. Eh, Jerry?"

Another thing that puzzled us was the fat lady's industry. Like I say, she moved into her new home at ten o'clock Saturday morning and about ten-fifteen Mrs. Bowman's parlor rugs came scooting through the front door onto the lawn. Presently the new tenant bustled onto the porch wearing a red and white gingham dress with a white towel tied over her corn-colored hair. She had a broom and a carpet beater. You should have seen her go at those rugs. Most fat people are kind of awkward when it comes to doing that kind of work. She wasn't. I bet the rugs got a backache from the sweeping and beat-

ing she gave them. And all the time she was working she kept singing to herself as though she were crammed full of happiness and wanted the neighbors to know about it.

When the parlor was cleaned to her satisfaction she tackled the front porch. First she brushed down the cobwebs from overhead. Then she got a mop and scrubbing brush and a can of Sunbrite cleaner. When the porch floor was dry she brought out a long strip of red carpet and put it neatly on the steps, with Mrs. Bowman's best sofa pillows tucked in at the sides in a cozy way. I never seen a front porch look so homelike and inviting.

"Huh!" sputtered Scoop, squinting darkly in the direction of the star-shaped pansy bed where the industrious tenant was now on her fat knees pulling weeds to the tune of "Wait Until the Sun Shines, Nellie." "I'm wise to her scheme," he went on. "She wants the Cap'n to think she's a swell housekeeper so he'll be more eager to forget about her three hundred and ninety-five pounds and marry her. I bet a cookie, though, that's the first porch floor she ever mopped in all her life. She's foxy."

Well, like I say, Monday morning came and she was still there, singing to herself as she put

a polish on the back porch with the mop and scrubbing brush. She stained the ice box, too, and the kitchen chairs. Between jobs she got in a few licks with the rake and hoe. I guess the dandelions just naturally curled up and expired when they saw her coming. Mrs. Bowman's house and yard never looked so spick and span. Some women have the knack of putting on the finishing touches that make a home distinctive. The Princess had that knack seemingly. Like Mother. As a housekeeper she was everything that Mrs. Bowman was and then some. Maybe she was putting her best foot forward as a bait to land the Cap'n, as Scoop declared, but even so I was willing to give her credit for what she was doing. I believe in fighting fair.

Monday afternoon while we were tinkering with the Cap'n's gasoline lamp on the side porch Mrs. Preeny came tripping down the street and turned in at the white gate. The Princess seemed awfully tickled. Scoop said we should do a little manicuring in our own yard, over by the picket fence, and that is how we came to overhear some of the conversation on the neighboring porch.

Mrs. Preeny is an awful talker. She told about her hay fever and how a traveling man had walked out of the hotel with two of Mr. Tomlin-

son's best woolen blankets in his suitcase. Then:

"I think you'll like Tutter when you get better acquainted," she ran along, nibbling at a chocolate cookie the Princess had treated her to.

"Tutter is perfectly dear," said the fat lady.

"You'll enjoy our Wednesday night band concerts," nibbled Mrs. Preeny.

"I just love band music," said the Princess, and she sighed. "When I was with Ringling's," she added, "we had a perfectly wonderful band. The conductor was *so* kind in letting me use his truck to get back and forth from the hotel to the grounds. Do have some more lemonade and another cookie."

Mrs. Preeny choked on a lemon seed, then inquired:

"Have you gotten acquainted with your next-door neighbor, Cap'n Tinkertop? He's a very nice man if you don't mind his wooden leg."

I pricked up my ears.

"Oh," purred the Princess, "has he a wooden leg?"

"His foot got pinched between two canal boats," informed Mrs. Preeny, "and they had to amputate it at the knee."

"How interesting," purred the Princess. Then she added: "No, I haven't seen anything of Mr.

'Tinkertop. I probably will when he gets out of quarantine."

Mrs. Preeny went stiff in her chair.

"Quarantine?" she repeated quickly, turning a pair of startled eyes in the direction of our TNIAP DER sign, which had been moved to the east porch. "What does it say?" she inquired, unable to read the lettering without glasses.

There was considerable low-toned conversation. Then the visitor laughed.

It was late that afternoon when the Princess decided to notice we were on earth. I was draped on the picket fence watching her pick pansies when she straightened and inquired:

"Well, how is your sick friend this evening?"

I was taken by surprise.

"He—he's getting better," I fumbled. Then I added: "Slowly."

"How nice," she murmured blandly. "I have been worried for fear he might die. TNIAP DER must be a very bad disease."

"Yes, ma'am," I admitted, suspecting she was guying me.

"I hope he is sufficiently recuperated to receive a message from me."

"Yes, ma'am," I repeated in the same stumbling way.

"You can tell him," said the Princess, "that I have rented this cottage for the balance of the summer and fall. That may hasten his recovery."

"Yes, ma'am," I said for the third time.

"And," she added, "the sooner he quits his foolishness the better pleased I'll be." Her face went grim and hard. "When I think of what he is doing it makes me furious," she concluded.

I hurried into the house and repeated the conversation to Scoop.

"Of course she's furious," he declared. "She's scared he'll slip through her fingers."

"What is her idea," I said, "in sending word to him that she has rented Mrs. Bowman's house for the balance of the summer and fall?"

"That's just a trick to throw a scare into him. You've heard of one army besieging another. Well, she's a besieger, kind of. She thinks if he knows the strength of her position he'll surrender."

Since the arrival of the Princess we had taken turns staying with the Cap'n nights. Monday night was Scoop's turn. The rest of us watched in my tent as usual. Nothing happened. The mysterious prowler hadn't visited us since Friday night. At least we had heard nothing of the stealthy footfalls. It was disappointing. Red

said maybe the prowler was gone for good. But Peg wouldn't give up. That's his way. Once he sets out to do a thing you can't turn him.

Tuesday morning we gathered at the Cap'n's house directly after breakfast. He seemed to have lost all his spunk.

"What's the matter?" Peg inquired. "Don't you feel well?"

"It's the worry, b'ys, of expectin' any minnit to have her come rushin' in on me," he explained. "It's makin' me a nervous wreck. I kain't sleep. An' I hain't bin used to bein' shet in the house all day long. Calc'late as heow I might jest as well give up the ship first as last. I kain't escape her. She's a-goin' to git me. Sooner or later. 'Tain't no use fur me to try an' dodge her."

"There ought to be a way," put in Scoop, his forehead going puckered.

The Cap'n slowly shook his head.

"B'ys, I've got the feelin' that not even my ol' friend, Ike Soaper, could git me outen the hole I'm in."

Scoop pricked up his ears.

"Ike Soaper?" he repeated, sharpening his memory.

The Cap'n nodded.

"Ike was a great schemer. A' awful smart

man. Mebby I never told you heow he went fishin' fur bullheads with cayenne pepper. Yes, sir, with cayenne pepper. Think of that! It was the summer after he married Sal Hooker. Sal told him she wanted a mess of bullheads fur supper, so it was up to Ike to go catch 'em. But no one in teown had bin catchin' bullheads that summer. The pesky things had jest naturally quit bitin'. Ike knew he could fish ordinary-like with a hook an' worm fur a hul week an' not git a nibble even. Here was need fur one of his smart schemes. Gittin' some cayenne pepper an' a stout paddle he started fur the river. Pickin' out a likely spot he mixed the pepper in a pan of sand an' thrun the sand in the river. Perty soon a ol' he bullhead come snoopin' along with his nose on the bottom an' got a snootful of pepper. Right away he started fur the surface of the water to sneeze. Ike was sittin' thar cross-legged, his eyes cocked an' the paddle ready. When the ol' he bullhead closed its eyes to let out a whopper of a sneeze Ike he up with the paddle an' busted mister fish on the snoot."

Peg let out a boisterous yip.

"*Some* fish story. Now, Cap, tell us the one where the perch were so greedy you had to go behind a tree to bait your hook."

But the Cap'n seemed not to hear our laughter. There was a dreamy, far-away look in his brown eyes. I knew he was thinking down the chain of years to the time when he and Ike were young men together.

"Yes, b'ys," he proceeded, "Ike was a' awful smart man. Take the time he waded in the canal an' made his wife think he was a-goin' to commit suicide. Sal was an awful jawer. But Ike's suicide scheme cured her fur all times. Um—— Perty slick, it was. Neow if *I* could only think up a scheme like that. But I kain't——"

Suddenly he paused and stared at us out of his thoughts. His eyes were big and startled.

"Why," said he, breathing hard, "I bet I *kin* do it. Neow hain't I the ol' gilly not to have thought of it before? I kin do it jest as easy as anything if you b'ys'll help me. Yes, sir, jest as easy as fallin' off a log, as my ol' friend, Ike Soaper, used to say. It's lucky I got to talkin' 'bout Ike. That is what made the idear pop into my mind."

"What idea?" Scoop spoke up.

There was a tense silence as the Cap'n slowly regarded us, first one, then another.

"B'ys," said he at length, "I'm a-goin' to commit suicide an' I want you to help me."

We stared at him. A kind of horrified stare. Like we couldn't believe our ears. Red had hold of my arm. I thought he would pinch it off. Then Scoop recovered his voice.

"Good night!" he yipped, clawing at his hair.

The Cap'n was grinning. A kind of contented grin. Like he was pretty well pleased with himself.

"Neow, b'ys," he chuckled, "there hain't no need fur you to up an' git excited. It hain't goin' to be no real suicide; jest a make-believe. You kin help me. An' when the fat lady is gone out of teown I kin come back to life."

Red dropped my arm. Hitching up his pants he started for the door.

"Help yourself," said he to the rest of us, motioning with his hands. "Here's where I vacate."

The Cap'n scowled.

"You mean you hain't goin' to stand by me?"

"Nix," said Red.

"But you promised."

"Too risky, said Red. "I don't want to get into trouble with the law."

"There hain't no law that says a man kain't commit suicide," the Cap'n sputtered.

"I suspect," said Red, "that there's a law

which takes care of people who *pretend* a suicide. I don't want to go to jail."

"No they hain't," came quickly from the Cap'n. "Ike Soaper he looked it up. A man is got a right to pretend things an' the law kain't stop him."

Red's freckled face was filled with uncertainty.

"You've got to promise," said he, "that if we do get into a scrape you'll take all the blame. I don't want Dad to play any razor-strap tunes on my hind quarters."

The Cap'n pottered about the kitchen in a tickled way.

"Why," said he, "of course I'll take all the blame. Of course. Jest like you say. But they hain't goin' to be no trouble. Not at all. They hain't nothin' to worry 'bout, b'ys. Neow I reckon we better git busy an' plan it."

Scoop was bubbling over.

"Hot dog!" he cried. "This is going to be fun." His hand came down on the old man's shoulders. "Cap'n," he laughed, "when it comes to brains I'll tell the world that Ike Soaper hasn't anything on you. You're the frog's knuckles, Cap'n."

There was a moment's reflective silence.

"I know how we'll do it," Scoop went on, kind

of excited-like. "We'll leave your shirt and pants and a note on the fourth quarry ledge. You can address the note to the Princess, telling her good-bye. Then, when your clothes are found, she'll think you are drowned."

The Cap'n lost some of his enthusiasm.

"I hain't a-goin' to let her have my pants an' shirt," he scowled. "No I hain't. How kin I git around without clothes? I hain't no squirrel."

Peg laughed and suggested:

"Why not leave your peg-leg on the ledge? That'll be better than clothes. Sure thing. People never bother to strip when they commit suicide. They just jump in. And we can tack a note to the wooden leg which will make people think the reason you left the leg behind was so you would have something to fasten the note to. You can hide in your houseboat till the fat lady does the vanishing act. We'll take care of you."

"I hain't a-goin' to give up my leg," whined the Cap'n. "It's the only artificial leg I've got. How kin I git around without a leg?"

"Don't get excited," said Scoop. "We'll return your peg-leg to you as soon as we're through with it. Guess it won't kill you to loaf around on one leg for an hour or two."

Well, we talked it over and arranged all the

details. First we would take the Cap'n to the river and help him get settled in his make-believe houseboat. Then we would park the peg-leg and the note on the fourth quarry ledge. A lot of kids swim in the fourth quarry. Men, too. The leg would soon be discovered.

"We'll work in pairs," planned Scoop. "Peg can help me plant the leg at the quarry. You fellows can fix up the note and keep an eye on the fat lady."

Red and I got out the Cap'n's writing paper and pen and ink. He was having one of his silly spells and wanted to write down a lot of mush. But I knew that wouldn't do. The note must sound real.

Peg was looking over my shoulder.

"Swell," he bragged, when I had finished the note.

At nine-thirty Scoop drove into the yard in one of his pa's delivery wagons. We helped the Cap'n through a west window. He was awfully clumsy. Once he got hooked on a nail and let out a screech. Like he was being killed.

Red and I watched the delivery wagon disappear down the street in a cloud of dust. Then we dropped onto the grass in a shady spot and played mumbly-peg till Peg returned.

"Everything's working lovely," he told us.

"Where's Scoop?" inquired Red.

"At the quarry."

"Got the peg-leg?" I put in eagerly.

"Sure. I helped him park it in the Genie Well. It won't be long before the leg is discovered because I met the Stricker gang heading for the quarry to take a swim. They'll think the Cap'n has drowned himself. Scoop is watching from the weeds. He wants me to come back. He said you fellows were to think up some scheme for letting the fat lady know that the Cap'n isn't in the house. Let her think he's escaped. Out of his head. That will pave the way for the big act. Well, so-long, fellows. Don't fumble."

Ten minutes later the Princess came into her front yard and bent over the pansy bed.

"Now's our chance," said Red. "I'll go out in front and yell stuff at you and you can yell back."

"All right," I agreed. I knew what he meant. We had pulled that stunt lots of times.

Pretty soon he yipped at me from the street:

"I hear the Cap'n is worse this morning."

"Yes," I yipped back. "He has queer nervous spells. Thinks he's a fish. We can hardly keep him out of the water pail."

"Don't let him drown himself," yipped Red.

"Oh, we're watching him close," I yipped back.

"I'd like to see him," yipped Red.

"I'll have him come to the front door," I yipped back and went into the house. I counted to thirty. Slowly. Then I ran into the yard, acting like I was batty.

"What's the matter?" yipped Red.

"He isn't in the house," I yipped back, looking wild.

Here the Princess came to the picket fence and beckoned to us.

"What is the meaning of all this nonsense?" she demanded when we came close.

"The Cap'n isn't in the house," I began. "He must have escaped through a window."

"You must think I'm awful green," she said sharply, "not to tumble to the fact that you are doing all this silly yelling for my benefit. Now tell me what you are up to," and she fastened a pair of firm eyes on us.

Red and I felt foolish. We hadn't expected she would tumble to our scheme.

"If I wasn't so provoked," she went on, "I'd be amused."

"Provoked?" I managed to say.

"Yes, provoked. Do you think it is pleasing to

a woman to be made fun of? And don't you suppose I know you boys have been laughing at me behind my back? Mr. Tinkertop, too. Oh, I know! I haven't traveled with a circus for more than twenty years, meeting thousands of people, without learning a few things about human nature. You needn't attempt to deny it," she added stiffly, when I tried to wedge my voice in. "I know how you've been talking about me. You've been making fun of me because I'm so fat. And Mr. Tinkertop thinks I moved into this place just to keep an eye on him. Well, I didn't. This is the only house in town I could rent furnished. I had to take it or go without. I tried, though, to mind my own business and make it plain to all that I wasn't interested in him in the least."

"But you wrote him a letter," I gasped, my knees going weak.

"Yes; and I want you to know it was the most foolish thing I ever did in all my life. I'd give a hundred dollars this very minute if I had that letter in my hands. That is what I wanted to see Mr. Tinkertop for: to explain to him that my letter was a silly mistake and request its return."

I could see now that we were the champion

BILL HADLEY WAS CARRYING THE CAP'N'S WOODEN LEG KIND OF GENTLE LIKE.

dumb-bells. The boob who dove into Mrs. Camel's cistern to rescue one of her ducks from drowning was smart beside of us. Maybe there was something we hadn't got twisted but I couldn't think what it was. I was sick and disgusted.

"He—he thought you wanted *him* to do the explaining," I said weakly.

"Well, he was mistaken."

"He thought you were going to make him marry you," blurted out Red.

Her face went scarlet.

"Oh, I know! And it is the most humiliating, the most cheapening situation I ever was in. It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't written that silly letter."

The pansies she had been holding fell to the grass as she dabbed at her blue eyes with the hem of her white apron. I felt pretty small. I was ashamed of myself. We hadn't given her a square deal. We hadn't behaved like gentlemen. I could see it now.

"I—I know I'm acting silly," she went on, her shoulders shaking, "but I—I can't help it. I have feelings, even if I am fat. I don't like to be laughed at. All my life I've wanted a home of my own. A small-town home. Where I would

have neighbors and a pansy bed and green grass and apple trees and cherry trees and little ch-hickens. I just love to cook and do housework. But I never had a chance to do anything but sit on a platform and have people stare at me and make remarks. Then the show busted up in Ashton. I had no friends to turn to. No job and no home. I was discouraged. I decided that I would give up the show business for good. Now was the time to take my savings and establish the little home I had always longed for. Then I read Mr. Tinkertop's advertisement in *The Home-Maker*. I answered it before I realized what an awful unwomanly thing I was doing. But I'm not going to talk about it any more. It was a foolish mistake and I've regretted it a thousand times. Only it hurts to know that the reason Mr. Tinkertop has been hiding from me behind a fake quarantine sign is because I'm fat. I—I was born fat and I can't help it. And considering that he has a wooden leg and is poorer than a church mouse, I can't see that he has so much justification in—in evading me. But I'm willing to overlook his unkindness and be a good neighbor if he will return my letter. It has worried me. I was afraid he would tell people about it. Newspapers like to publish such things. So I came here to get the

letter. If you will explain the situation to him——"

My mind was more orderly now. I was glad, because I realized the need for quick action. First I would beat it to the fourth quarry and head off the Stricker gang. After what the Princess had told us it would be the biggest kind of a mistake for them to find the note and the peg-leg. Scoop and Peg would be hiding near by. I would explain everything to them. Then we would return the Cap'n's peg-leg and tell him to come home.

"Lookit!" screeched Red in my ear, pointing down the street.

Well, I can't describe the feeling of despair that stole over me. I was crazy, almost. Coming toward the white cottage was Bill Hadley. About fifty kids tagged at his heels. He was carrying the Cap'n's wooden leg. Holding it out in front of him kind of choice and gentle-like. And when he passed through the white gate I noticed that his homely face was drawn down and sober.

Scoop and Peg were in the crowd. Right behind Bill. Their eyes sparkled. They were tickled to have Bill mixed up in the affair. It made it seem more *official.*

"Ma'am," said Bill, removing his policeman cap and looking awful pious, "I've got some bad news for you."

The Princess was staring at the wooden leg, one hand over her heart, the other touching her fat chin.

"This," said Bill, patting it gently, "is all we have been able to find of your pore sweetheart, Cap'n Tinkertop. I know he intended you should have his leg to remember him by because he left you this note tacked to it."

The Princess took the note and read it. Here it is:

> Good-by, Miss Dottie. I'll meet you in heaven.
>
> CAP'N BOAZ TINKERTOP.

"Suppose," she said to Bill, her face a sort of purplish red, "that you shorten the suspense and tell me what this is all about."

Pretty soon the story was all told, how the Stricker gang had found the leg in the Genie Well and how Scoop and Peg had sent Jimmy Stricker to town to sound the alarm. That is where Bill came in. Jimmy ran into him at the cement mill where he was serving some kind of a paper on a foreigner who had jumped his board bill.

"We're goin' to search the quarry for the body," concluded Bill, handing the Princess the wooden leg. "I'll let you know, ma'am, as soon as we find it."

The Princess didn't say anything. She just gave us boys a queer look and passed into the house, the wooden leg tucked under her arm.

Presently the crowd melted away. When we were grouped in the Cap'n's silent cottage I told Scoop and Peg what monkeys we had made of ourselves.

"There wasn't time to run to the quarry and head you off," I said. "And with Bill actually thinking the Cap'n had drowned himself I didn't dare speak up and tell the truth. I'd likely got a bat on the head."

Scoop gave a scattered laugh and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I don't know," said he, "is the joke on the Cap'n or on Bill or on us."

"What are we going to do about it?" put in Peg.

"I guess," said Scoop, "we better go to the river and talk it over with the Cap'n. He was the one who suggested the fake suicide. We just helped."

"It strikes me," said Peg, "that if the Cap'n

hasn't a scheme for coming back to life he's going to be out of luck."

Scoop was squinting through the open door in the direction of the white cottage.

"She took the peg-leg into the house with her," he reflected. "I didn't figure on that."

"How are we going to get it?" put in Red.

"We hardly dare ask her for it," said Scoop, "before the Cap'n comes to life. And he can't very well come to life without his peg-leg. What *are* we going to do?"

"We'll stick around here this afternoon," said Peg, "and see what happens. Maybe she'll hang the leg on the back porch where we can get it. Then this evening we'll go to the river and see the Cap'n. Looks to me like our responsibility in the matter ends as soon as we return the peg-leg."

I was worried. Bill had told the Princess he intended dragging the quarry that afternoon to recover the Cap'n's body. We'd catch it when he learned that the suicide was a hoax.

The noon whistles blew while we were talking. We beat it out of the house, locking the door behind us. Scoop hid the key under a stone at the corner of the porch.

The Princess kept out of sight that afternoon.

What she had done with the wooden leg we could only guess at. Five o'clock came and we were no nearer to possessing it than we had been that noon when we talked over how we would return it to the Cap'n in the evening.

Peg got up and stretched.

"Aw, shucks! I'm tired of hanging around here. Let's go take a swim. We have a whole hour before supper time."

It was a relief to me when we found the quarry deserted. I had expected Bill would be there with his grapnel. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to meet him. I was afraid the expression of my face would give me away.

Usually I enjoy a swim. To-day I didn't.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" Scoop inquired, when we were dressing.

I told him my troubled thoughts.

"Rats!" said he. "Bill can't do anything to us. He'll be mad, of course, but we should worry. I guess our pas will stand behind us and protect us if he tries to pull any rough stuff, like putting us in the cooler. I know my pa won't let him lay a finger on *me*. Besides, Bill may be more willing than you think to drop the matter and keep his mouth shut. Won't the other men give him the horselaugh when they learn how he

delivered the peg-leg to the fat lady? Sure. He'll get guyed about it right and left."

"I know what'll drive away Jerry's gloom," laughed Peg.

Scoop glanced up.

"A little 'Turkey in the Straw,'" said Peg.

"Sure," giggled Scoop, and out came his mouth organ. Pretty soon he was bearing down hard on "Turkey in the Straw," Peg and Red dancing around like a pair of silly clowns. First one would jab me in the ribs, then the other. It put a grin on my face and drove away my worries.

About to join in the fun, I had my attention drawn to something coming down the cliff path. It looked like a brown hen. I rubbed my eyes, realizing that there wasn't a poultry yard within half a mile. It couldn't be a hen, I reasoned, because chickens never wander so far from home. Then, too, it was acting unlike any chicken I ever had seen.

But it was a chicken—a big brown hen.

"Lookit!" I yipped to the others. Red and Peg stopped dead still and stared. Scoop, though, had his eyes turned into the clouds and hadn't noticed the strange visitor.

Well, Red and I and Peg stared as the brown hen came closer. Soon it was on the ledge. And

now it was going around and around. Dancing, kind of. I could hardly believe my eyes. A dancing hen! I never had heard of such a thing.

"Lookit the dancing hen, Scoop," cried Red, tugging at the musician's elbow.

Scoop let his music dry up and stared.

"Where in Sam Hill did that hen come from?" he wanted to know.

"It came down the path from the cliff," I told him.

"It knows how to dance," giggled Red. "Play some more, Scoop. You know—that tune about 'Where, oh, where, has my little dog gone'?"

"Ding dong and away we go," laughed Scoop, in imitation of the Cap'n. Then he started in on the waltz tune.

Well, you should have seen that hen waltz. It didn't make a sound. It didn't pay any attention to us. Around and around it went. Its feet moving in time to the music. Scoop switched to "Turkey in the Straw" and it spun around faster and faster.

"Why," yelled Red, "I never seen Cap'n Tinkertop do any better 'an that."

I was thinking the same thing. There was something about the hen that reminded me of the Cap'n. I guess it was the way it spun first

on one foot, then on the other. Around and around and around.

Well, we stood there taking in the free show as it were, spatting our hands and yelling. Then, just as on another day, the dancer went kerflop into the Genie Well, only this time instead of a screech there was a frightened squawk and a wild flutter of wings. After that the hen wouldn't do a thing for us. We patted it on the back and rubbed its head but this didn't do a bit of good. It just went cluck! cluck! cluck! like an ordinary hen and pecked aimlessly at our toenails. Scoop played the lost dog and turkey tunes. Nothing doing.

"I wonder," said Peg after a few minutes, "if we were dreaming. A waltzing hen! Why, if we told anybody we had seen this hen waltz they would say we were batty. Absolutely. Maybe, fellows, we imagined it waltzed. Hindu magicians have a marvelous way of making people imagine untrue and unreal things. Maybe," and he squinted toward the cliff, "maybe there's a Hindu magician up there putting a spell on us."

Right away I got a creepy feeling. Talking of Hindu magicians recalled to my mind the yellow stranger who had died of heart failure in the Tutter hotel. He was a Hindu. And there

was the unsolved mystery of the whispering trunk and the prowling peril. Could it be, like Scoop said, that the peril was a boy, a Hindu boy, who was now concealed on the cliff the better to work his magic on us without being detected?

It was a crazy thought. But I have told it to you just as it came to me. Maybe the reason I was willing to let such queer ideas come into my mind was because my nerves were getting frazzled. The past few days had been crammed full of surprising adventures.

Well, we ran up the path. Lickety cut. No one was in sight. We searched in the weeds. Couldn't find a thing. And there at our heels was the waltzing hen.

"What are we going to do with it?" said Scoop, giving the hen a puzzled glance.

"If no one else wants it," said Red, "I'll take it home and put it in with our chickens."

"Help yourself," laughed Scoop.

Presently we trudged into town. When we came to Red's house he and I turned in. He had the brown hen parked under his arm.

"Lookit, Ma," he said, "I've got a new hen."

Mrs. Meyers wanted to know where it came from and all about it. We told her.

"A waltzing hen," she laughed, holding her sides. "How ridiculous."

Red scowled.

"It *can* waltz," he sputtered. "You just play a tune on the piano and you'll see."

We took the hen into the parlor and Mrs. Meyers put a newspaper on the floor so the hen wouldn't dirty the rug. Then she played a tune on the piano. But contrary to our expectations the hen wouldn't waltz. It acted like the stupidest hen in the whole world.

Red and I felt pretty cheap.

"Go put it in the yard with the other hens," instructed Mrs. Meyers, "and we'll see if it knows how to lay an egg. If it does we'll keep it."

I said good-by to Red and cut down the alley and up our back steps. Mother hugged me when I came into the kitchen.

"Oh, Jerry," she said, picking a piece of hard dirt out of my left ear, "I've been so worried. Were you swimming in the fourth quarry this afternoon?"

"Yes, ma'am," I admitted uneasily.

"You mustn't go there any more. It's very dangerous. I've just heard about poor Cap'n Tinkertop. Lulu told me. She says Bill lost his grapnel in one of the deep holes and won't be

able to recover the body till to-morrow. The sheriff at Ashton is sending over a new grapnel or something. And to think that the poor Cap'n would commit suicide over that fat lady. It is ridiculous. The hussy!"

"She isn't a hussy," I defended. "She's a nice lady."

"Any woman who has any respect for herself wouldn't be traveling with a cheap circus," sputtered Mother.

I didn't argue any more. I knew I wouldn't get very far. Maybe Mother would change her mind about the Princess when she got acquainted with her, was my thought. It was natural for people to think poorly of circus performers. *We* had made the same mistake.

"We won't wait supper for your father," said Mother, putting the food on the table and filling the water pitcher. "He may not get home before eight o'clock."

"Where is he?" I inquired.

"They're having trouble with the new loading machine in the clay pit across the river. He drove over with a mechanic about four o'clock."

I had completed my supper and was busy feeding the yellow cat when Dad drove our car into the garage.

"Hi, Jerry," he called, bounding up the steps. He put a hand on my shoulder. It was a firm, friendly hand. "I'm sorry we lost our old friend," he said in a low voice.

I want to tell you that right then and there I felt like the meanest, smallest, most no-account thing in the world. I was miserable in the thought that I was a liar and a cheat. Yes, I was. Kind of. I guess if he hadn't went on into the kitchen and fooled around with Mother I would have blurted out the truth.

Presently he came to the door, wiping his hands on a towel.

"Did you know, Jerry, that the Cap'n's houseboat is burned up?"

I stared. A cold, dead feeling took hold of my body. The Cap'n's houseboat burned up! Why——

"I saw the smoke when we were on our way to the pit. When we got to the raft nothing was left but the smoking logs. The cabin was entirely burned away. Probably some tramp set fire to it trying to use the Cap'n's gasoline stove. Jerry! What makes you look so white? Are you sick?"

I shook my head. I told him I wasn't sick.

And somehow I managed to stumble down from the porch to the lawn. When I felt the soft grass under my feet I started to run. I didn't know where I was going. I just ran.

It was plain to me now what had happened. Yes, everything was as clear as day. The Cap'n had been burned up at the river and in some marvelous way had been transmigrated into a hen. And he had come running to us for protection. He had danced for us, so that we would recognize him. Yes, he had even skidded into the Genie Well. And we never understood! Like dumbbells we had chucked him into an old hen yard in company with a lot of other hens that were just ordinary hens and not transmigrated hens. And Mrs. Meyers expected him to lay an egg!

Then I got another thought. We were responsible for what had happened. We had taken the Cap'n to the houseboat. And when the fire occurred he couldn't escape because we had his peg-leg. The fact that he had coaxed us to help him out with his suicide scheme didn't make us any the less responsible.

I shivered under the burden of my fear. I wondered was there a law that sent boys to jail who had done what we had done.

Pretty soon I came within sight of Mr. Meyers' hen yard. Mrs. Meyers was standing on the back porch shaking a tablecloth.

"Donald is down town buying some licorice," she told me. "His pa gave him a dime and of course it burnt a hole in his pocket. Maybe you'd like to play on his trapeze until he gets back."

"I've come to get the—the brown hen," I managed to say.

"You'll find it in the hen house," she said, giving the tablecloth a final flip. "Just go and help yourself."

But the brown hen wasn't there as she said. Mr. Meyers' hens are white; and all the hens in the hen house were white. Nowhere was there a brown hen.

"Why," said Mrs. Meyers, "I bet Mr. Ellery picked out the brown hen. He drove over about ten minutes ago to see if we would sell him a hen. Some tourists unexpectedly dropped in on Mrs. Ellery to stay over night and she thought it would be nice to prepare some pressed chicken for their lunch to-morrow. They're leaving early in the morning. That is why she has to cook the chicken to-night."

On the instant a horrifying picture came into

my mind of Mrs. Ellery's tourists. I could see them sitting by the roadside. It was noon and they were eating their lunch. I could see the pressed chicken. The piece they said tasted so good was Cap'n Tinkertop's right arm. I saw them eat his left arm. Then his good leg. Then his neck. Then his body. I thought of the cannibals in "Robinson Crusoe." And like the time I read the book I could smell cooking flesh. Human flesh. My imagination plays such tricks on me.

I started away on the run. Mrs. Meyers called to me but I don't know what she said. I was pretty near crazy.

If I didn't get to Scoop's house before Mr. Ellery cut off the brown hen's head the Cap'n would be murdered. And if I didn't get there in time to save the poor Cap'n from being cooked and made into pressed chicken, Mr. Ellery would be a murderer.

Then a more awful thought came to me. Scoop is my pal and I like him a lot. Suppose he unknowingly committed the awful deed!

CHAPTER XI

MY HEROISM

I NEVER was much of a runner. Dad says my feet are built like canal boats. But the night I chased across town to save Mr. Ellery and Scoop from being murderers my feet seemed to have wings. I ran like I never ran before. Out of Mrs. Meyers' yard and down Main Street to Grove Street. Then up Grove Street to Scoop's house. I don't know how many minutes it took me. Maybe it was only seconds. The awful fear that I would be too late to save the Cap'n from being made into pressed chicken is what sent me over the sidewalks and around the corners so fast.

When I tumbled into Scoop's lawn I was puffing like the donkey engine in Dad's clay pit. Scoop wasn't in sight. No one was. But as I paused beside Mrs. Ellery's rubber plant to scratch a mosquito bite and wipe the sweat from my face I heard voices in the back yard.

For an instant I stood there with my itchy foot

in the air and my ears peeled. Poised, kind of. I was afraid that the voices would die away and I would hear instead a gurgling, despairing squawk. The kind of a squawk a hen gives when the sharp edge of a hatchet comes down kerplunk on its windpipe.

But there wasn't any squawk. I was glad. And I beat it around the corner of the house to see what was going on.

There on the back porch was Mr. and Mrs. Ellery and Scoop's two sisters and a strange lady and gentleman. Scoop was playing a waltz tune on his mouth organ and Peg Shaw was spatting his hands and feet in time to the music. I squeezed my way into the circle. All eyes were fastened on the brown hen. It was waltzing around and around on a cheese case.

A great relief came to me. I had saved the Cap'n from getting his transmigated head chopped off. And I had saved Mr. Ellery and Scoop from being murderers. More than that, I had saved Mrs. Ellery's visitors from being cannibals. With all my worries over what was likely to happen to me later on when the law took me in hand, I told myself with modest pride that what I had done was heroism. Just the same as rescuing a man from drowning. I thought it would

be nice to have the Tutter people know what I had done. Dad is always talking to me about doing brave and heroic things. He would be proud of me.

In that moment I realized how it repays a boy to have a quick brain. If I had been a dough-head I never would have tumbled to the fact that the hen was the transmigration of the Cap'n. I was glad I wasn't a dough-head. It was satisfying, kind of, and pleasing to know that as yet Scoop and Peg hadn't tumbled to the truth of the situation. Scoop thinks he's pretty smart.

Mr. Ellery was acting awfully tickled over the way the brown hen was performing.

"Well, I swan," he cackled, holding his fat sides. "I never seen anything so funny. A waltzing hen! And to think I almost chopped her head off. I would have done it just as sure as anything if Howard hadn't recognized the hen and stopped me. I bet she's worth a lot of money. Probably escaped from some circus."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't speak up and tell the truth without giving away the fake suicide. That would never do. To tell him that the waltzing hen was Cap'n Tinkertop's transmigration would invite questions I didn't care to answer.

When Scoop ran out of wind Mrs. Ellery told him to return the brown hen to Mrs. Meyers and exchange it for a white one.

"We want an egg-laying hen and not a waltzer," she laughed.

At this point I pressed forward.

"I'll take it back," I offered, eager to get my hands on it. Not until the hen was in my arms would I feel safe!

"Make it snappy," said Mr. Ellery, as Scoop and I and Peg trailed out of the yard.

On the instant a queer reverent feeling stole over me as I realized that I was holding in my arms the transmigration of Cap'n Tinkertop. It was as though a Bible miracle had been performed right before my very eyes. I was filled with awe. I guess that's the right word. Sometimes in church I have the same feeling. As though God in all His wonders was very real and very close.

Steadying my voice I told Scoop and Peg about the houseboat fire and the transmigration. They stared at me. Dumb-like. Then they shifted their eyes from my face to the brown hen.

"Gee-miny crickets!" exploded Peg.

There was a bewildered pucker on Scoop's forehead.

"Maybe your pa is mistaken," he began, as

though he wanted to believe it wasn't true. "Maybe it was another raft——"

"Dad knows where the Cap'n's houseboat was anchored," I put in. "There isn't any mistake," I added. "The Cap'n has burned up and transmigrated himself into a hen and here he is."

Scoop looked closely into the hen's face. It clucked and blinked its beadlike eyes.

"It does put me in mind of the Cap'n," he admitted slowly. "It even has a little bump on the side of its head. Just like the wart on his nose." He had a dizzy look.

"Aw, shucks!" put in Peg. "I don't take no stock in this transmigration stuff."

"All right," I flared up. "If you're so wise suppose you tell us where the hen did come from."

"I don't know where it came from; but I don't believe it's Cap'n Tinkertop," declared Peg in his stubborn way.

There was a brief silence.

"We'll let Jerry keep the hen," Scoop spoke up. "Maybe he'll think of a way to prove whether it is a transmigrated hen or isn't. Um—— I wish I knew more about this queer Hindu religion. Jainism. Maybe they have books about it in the public library. I'm going to inquire tomorrow."

"If you aren't in jail," I reminded gloomily.

He stared at me.

"How do you get that way?" was his quick come-back.

I told him my thoughts—how we were indirectly responsible for the Cap'n's death and would likely find the law tumbling down on us.

"I don't think they can do anything to us," he reflected. "If the Cap'n' is burned up, like your pa says, it's an accident. We aren't to blame. I wish, though," was his sober conclusion, "we hadn't let him drag us into it."

"It strikes me," spoke up Peg in a steady voice, "that the thing for us to do is to tell our fathers what has happened. If the Cap'n was burned to death on his raft it is wrong for us to let everybody think he drowned himself. Don't you think our fathers should know the truth?"

I didn't answer. Neither did Scoop.

We were pretty sober as we walked down the street. Like Peg said the square thing for us to do was to tell the truth surrounding the circumstances leading up to the Cap'n's death. But to do that would get us into law trouble. Maybe our fathers couldn't save us.

As I kept step with the others I thought of the

time I fell from the slaughter house roof and twisted my right ankle in a pile of old cow bones. Mostly skulls. Mrs. Maloney brought me over some currant jelly. She knows how well I like it. Mother told her how she was constantly worried about me for fear I'd some day fall off something and break my neck. Mrs. Maloney had cackled out: "Sure, Miz Todd, don't lit that worry ye. B'ys who is born to be hung ain't a-goin' to die in no other way." She had meant it as a joke, of course. All the same I wondered if her prophecy was going to come true.

Scoop and Peg turned in at Red's house and I went on home. I didn't care for any of Red's licorice. I wanted to be alone. To think.

I took the hen into my tent and put it on one of the beds. And I lay down on the other bed and tried to figure out what I should do. If I let them arrest me Mother and Dad would be disgraced. Maybe I had better run away. Then they couldn't arrest me. Yes, that was the thing for me to do. I could go to some foreign country like Texas or Alaska and start my life over again under a different name. I could find a good name in some wild west book.

Well, about the time I got it planned out how I would grow up tough and hard, like the western-

ers in the picture shows, a sick feeling settled in my stomach. There was Mother and Dad. I love them like a boy should who has a good pa and ma. And I knew they loved me because they showed it in their actions. Dad hates fig cookies but Mother always keeps them in the house. Because I like them. They let me pick out a new talking machine record each month and no matter what I buy they always say it's swell. I guess no boy ever had a better pa and ma. I wanted to save them from being disgraced but it made me unhappy to think of leaving home.

Yes, I would miss them like sixty. And they would miss me. No one can fry raw potatoes like Mother. Crisp and brown. Crunchy. Not too greasy. I'd miss her fried potatoes.

Then I remembered I had left Dad's casting line all tangled up. It wouldn't be right for me to run away from home and not fix up the line like I found it. Maybe when I was fixing it he would ask me was I going fishing. Of course I would have to tell him the truth if he persisted. I wondered was he in the house. If he were on the front porch I would take the line there and untangle it. It would be nice to have him know about my troubles.

I went into the house. It was awfully still.

There was a note from Mother on the hall table. She and Dad had gone out for an auto ride.

I decided not to run away that night. I would wait till Mother and Dad were home. Maybe Dad wouldn't let me run away. Maybe he would find a scheme to help me. He can think up some good schemes to help a fellow.

I went back to the tent. The hen was fluttering around trying to roost for the night on the swinging rope where I hang my clothes. That wouldn't be a very comfortable way to sleep I thought. Maybe it was all right for an ordinary hen, but the Cap'n hadn't been a hen many hours. This was his first night at it. I figured he would be a lot more comfortable in bed with me.

It was early in the evening. Not later than eight o'clock. I lay down on the bed without undressing, letting the hen settle into a fluffy ball beside me. I wondered if Mother and Dad would take a long drive. It was awfully quiet. I wished they were home. I missed them. I wanted Mother to be close to me so I could touch her. I wasn't scared. I don't want you to think I was. It was a lonesome feeling, not a scared feeling.

It got dark. I heard the living room clock strike eight-thirty. Why didn't Mother and Dad come home? Nine o'clock. My bed was tumbled

and uncomfortable. Maybe they were having engine trouble. Maybe——

I didn't realize I had been asleep till I was jerked out of a crazy dream. I sat up. It was awful dark. My heart was racing. A cold fear crept over me. I shivered.

What had awakened me? I held my breath and listened. Could it be——

Yes, it was the mysterious prowler. I hadn't given the prowling peril a thought when I turned in. My mind had been filled with other things.

Pat! pat! pat! Somehow to-night the footfalls sounded different. Less stealthy. As though the prowler were coming directly toward the tent entrance. And I noticed that the footfalls were like this: Pat! *pat!* pat! *pat!* A soft "pat!" Then a louder one. The prowler was doing most of its walking on one foot.

I don't know what came over me. Maybe God has a way of taking care of boys who find themselves in the grip of an unknown and unexpected danger. Anyway, the fear that had held me melted away. It went out of my mind and out of my trembling arms and legs. I didn't tremble now. Not a finger even. I felt like a hero; and I knew that I was going to act like a hero. I'm not bragging about it. I'm just telling you.

The prowler was close to the tent. I got up. Without a sound. My right hand reached for a club. My left hand closed over a flashlight. Then I crouched and waited.

A peering face was framed in the tent opening. I could feel its presence. My thumb felt for the flashlight switch. I gritted my teeth and pressed. There was a flood of light. I saw a human head. A man's head. Down came the club. It struck. A sickening dull thud. Like a watermelon tapped with a heavy jackknife. There was a frightened yell. A gurgle. The flashlight slipped from my hand. I heard it strike the board floor. Then something else fell. It was the prowler. I had captured him.

As I stood there in a well of silence a yell came from out of the darkness.

"Jerry! *Jerry!* Switch on the light. Quick!" It was Scoop's voice. I heard Peg, too. And Red Meyers.

The light went on. Scoop and the others were just without the tent. They couldn't get in because a man's body blocked the entrance. I bent down. And when I straightened and looked into the faces of my pals I guess my own face was the color of chalk. It felt white. And drawn.

The man on the floor was Cap'n Tinkertop. It

wasn't a ghost. It was a real man. I had touched him. His body was warm. And I could smell lard. He puts it on his hair sometimes.

In a vague dazed way I realized that he hadn't burned to death on the raft like we thought. Having escaped from the raft he had fashioned a crutch from a tree limb and limped back to town. Probably to enlist our help. I could understand well enough why he had waited for darkness.

Right then and there this bunk about Jainism and transmigration was wiped forever from my mind. I realized I had let my imagination play a crazy trick on me. The Cap'n had never transmigrated himself into a hen. There was some secret about the mysterious hen, but it wasn't transmigration. Maybe, as Mr. Ellery said, it was a trained circus hen.

In the knowledge that I wasn't a law breaker I became the happiest boy in the whole world. I lost my head, kind of. Anyway I hugged Red. And when I got my senses back I was eating licorice.

CHAPTER XII

BUTTA BUTTA

WELL, as old Deacon Pillpopper says when he can't think of anything else to say, there's a time to eat and a time to sleep and a time to sing and a time to weep. But with Cap'n Tinkertop knocked senseless on the floor of my tent where the big grease spot is I realized this wasn't the time for me to sit around and fill up on licorice. It was the time to get busy with a little first aid. So I shoved the licorice into my pants pocket and took hold of the Cap'n's shoulders.

"Some one take his hind legs," I said, "and we'll put him on the bed."

Scoop helped me. We had about all we could handle because the body was as limp as a soggy dish rag.

While I was getting the whole leg and the half leg untangled Scoop ran his fingers through the lard-soaked hair.

"My gosh, Jerry, you sure landed on him

proper. There's a bump here as big as my two thumbs."

"Any blood?" Peg inquired anxiously.

Scoop shook his head.

"We ought to have some water," he said.

"I'll get it," I offered, running from the tent.

When I returned with the water Scoop sprinkled it in the Cap'n's face. Then he soaked the shirt of my pajamas and made a pad for the swelling bump.

"That ought to bring him to."

Peg and I sat down on the bed where the hen was.

"I suppose you're wondering how we happened to be outside the tent," he said, putting his hand on my knee.

It is a fact that in the rush of events I hadn't thought very much about it. I told him so. But I was curious, now that he mentioned it.

"It was Scoop's idea," he went on. "We were over at Red's playing croquet. When it got too dark to see the arches, Scoop says: 'Let's go over to Jerry's and watch the tent from the outside.' We talked it over. It looked like a pretty good scheme. If the prowler came we could close in on him. We came over about nine o'clock. You

were in the tent. We could hear you. And then——"

"And then the prowler came," I supplied, scratching an itchy spot on my nose, "and I beaned him with my club."

Peg had a thoughtful look on his face as he regarded the unconscious man on the opposite bed.

"The Cap'n was a prowler, all right," he said slowly, "but he isn't the one we've been laying for. Nope. The other one is still at large."

I knew Peg was right. I could recall that the Cap'n's footfalls had sounded most unlike the regular prowler's footfalls. Even in my excitement I had noticed it.

Scoop was dribbling water onto the warty nose.

"I think I know why the Cap'n came here," he spoke up, glancing into our faces. "He still thinks the fat lady is laying for him. So he didn't dare go home. And with his raft burned up he had no place to hide. We were the only ones he could turn to for help. He knew about us sleeping in the tent."

"I'm sorry I beaned him," I said, my face going sober.

"No one can blame you," said Peg. "You thought it was the peril."

Red was hitching at his shirt.

"I guess he's the only 'peril' we'll ever catch," he put in.

Peg's face took on its most stubborn look.

"Don't kid yourself," he gritted. "If there *is* a peril, like we think, it's going to be captured and we're going to do it."

On the moment my thoughts flashed back to the mysterious yellow man and the whispering trunk. I could not doubt that somthing had escaped from the trunk just as Scoop said. But what could it be?

Red quit hitching at himself long enough to pick up the crutch that the Cap'n had fashioned from a tree limb.

"Some crutch," he said, trying to use it. "I bet he had a time getting here."

"He came up the alley," Peg said to me. "We heard the crutch going thump! thump! thump!—only we didn't know what it was. Then he came into the yard. We could see it was a man. You can imagine how excited we were. Red wanted to run——"

"Aw, I didn't."

"Yes, you did," put in Scoop.

"When the prowler poked his head in your tent," continued Peg, "we gave a yell. You

floored him before we had a chance to jump on him."

While we were talking the Cap'n moved his arms and groaned. Then his eyes popped open and he sat up, staring at us in a frightened, wondering way.

"I—I got hit on the haid," he mumbled, feeling of the bump with a pottering hand. "I come here to git you b'ys to help me an' some one up an' banged me a' awful rap on the haid."

"It was an accident," said Scoop. "Now, lay down and let me put a cold cloth on the sore spot. There you are. Doesn't that feel better?"

"It feels all swelled up. An' my haid is dizzy. Like everything is whizzin' 'round in a circle. Some one hit me on the haid with a crowbar."

"Brace up," encouraged Scoop. "You don't realize it, Cap'n, but your troubles are over with."

The brown eyes scowled.

"I kain't go home 'cause the fat lady'll git me. An' I hain't got no place to hide from her with my houseboat burnt up. I'm hungry as a b'ar an' I hain't got nothin' to eat. An' you up an' tell me my troubles is over with!"

"We'll take you home and get you something to eat," promised Scoop. "Now quit your fussing. Doesn't your head feel better?"

"It's got a' awful thump in it."

Scoop carefully inspected the bruise.

"Maybe if we had some liniment——"

"I can get some in Mother's medicine cabinet," I offered.

"Fine," said Scoop.

I ran into the house. Just as I switched on the lights the clock struck ten. Mother and Dad were still away. The liniment bottle had a green label. I remembered because the time I ran a rusty corkscrew into my heel Mother used a lot of the liniment on my foot. Seeing the green-labeled bottle on the bathroom window-sill I let my fingers close over it and tumbled pell-mell down the stairs.

"It isn't the kind of liniment that stings," I told Scoop, "so you can use a lot of it."

He poured some of the liquid into the palm of his hand and slapped it on the Cap'n's bump.

"I'll rub it in," he said, using both hands.

Well, about the time he got started on the second rub the invalid straightened like a jack-knife into a sitting position and gave him a shove.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" shrieked the Cap'n, flourishing his arms like a windmill. "I'm burnin' up. Fire!" he yelled, fanning his head with his hands.

Scoop gave me a scowl.

"I thought you said it didn't sting."

Peg was holding the liniment bottle. Here he squinted at the green label and rolled over on the bed.

"Oh, gosh! It's furniture polish," he yipped. "Oh, ho, ho, ho!"

I felt pretty cheap. And what Scoop said to me didn't cheer me up none.

It took us more than ten minutes to get the Cap'n quieted down. Then, when he was in a mood to understand what we were saying, we told him how he had made mountains out of molehills in dodging the fat lady.

"She isn't interested in you no more than she is in a one-legged pollywog," Peg told him.

"Mebby, neow——"

"No 'maybe' about it. Come on. We'll take you home and bone her for your peg-leg."

Just as we were leaving the tent Dad and Mother drove into the yard.

"Hi, gang," Dad called out, turning the spotlight on us. Then I heard him give a gasp. "Great Scott," he said to Mother, "it's Cap'n Tinkertop," and he piled out of the car.

The Cap'n seemed suddenly to droop in every one of his joints.

"It's what's left of me," he groaned, as Dad

came up to where we were. "They thrun red paint on me, they did, an' made me stay in bed an' then they stole my paig-laig an' soaked me on the haid with a crowbar an' rubbed red-hot furniture polish on me an' I'm jest about dead."

Dad turned to me with a serious face.

"Is this true, Jerry?"

I told him what was what. Yes, sir, I spit out the whole story. It made me hot to think the Cap'n would try to shift the blame onto us. After the way we had run our legs off to help him! This was gratitude for you. He evidently wasn't the friend I thought he was.

Dad put in a few questions here and there. He wanted to know did *we* suggest the suicide scheme or did the Cap'n. I explained to him that the Cap'n suggested it and told in detail how he coaxed us to help him. The others backed me up.

"I want to go home," whined the Cap'n, when my indignant voice trailed away.

"I've been wanting you to say that," said Peg, taking the old man by the arm.

Dad noticed the crutch.

"Let's use the car," he suggested. "I can drive you over just as well as not."

Arriving at the Cap'n's house we got the key

from under the flat rock and unlocked the east door. Peg lit the parlor lamp.

"Now," said he, "we'll go over to the fat lady's and get your wooden leg for you and then we're through."

I told Dad not to wait for me. And I followed on Peg's heels through the white gate. Scoop was behind me, then Red. If there's a tail end to anything that's where you'll find Red Meyers. Every time.

There was a light in the white cottage. Through the open door we could see the Princess reading a book. I recognized the covers. It was Mrs. Bowman's big white cook book. Mother borrowed it one time to learn how to cook an eel I caught in the Illinois River.

Peg rapped on the screen door.

"Come in," said the Princess without moving from her chair.

We stepped inside and lined up under Mrs. Bowman's "God-bless-our-happy-home" sampler. I felt foolish.

"I've been expecting you all evening," said the Princess, putting the cook book on the center table beside Mrs. Bowman's gold-fish globe.

We stared.

"I knew there was no truth to that suicide

report," she went on. "I recognized it as some more of your foolishness. But I was glad to get the peg-leg. I intend to keep it, too, till I get my letter. So if you've come to break the glad news to me that Mr. Tinkertop is alive and needs his leg, just trot along and get my letter and we'll talk business."

Peg gulped and recovered his voice.

"I'll get the letter for you," he said, and beat it out of the front door. Pretty soon he came back and handed the letter to the Princess. She glanced at the paper to make sure there was no mistake, then thrust it into the neck of her dress.

"Now," reminded Peg, "if you'll let us have the wooden leg——"

Getting to her feet the Princess passed into the kitchen. A moment later she returned to the parlor with the Cap'n's leg.

Peg hung back when we passed onto the porch.

"Well?" said the Princess.

"I think you ought to know," he fumbled, "that we're ashamed of the way the Cap'n used you. He didn't give you a square deal; and he coaxed us to take sides with him. Any time we can help you——"

"Stop in to-morrow," said the Princess in a warmer voice, "and we'll talk it over."

In the street I glanced back at the Cap'n's house. His stooped shoulders passed before one of the lighted windows. On the instant my anger melted away. It was true he hadn't played fair with us, but somehow I wanted to overlook it. We had been friends for a long time. I felt sorry for him. Like Dad says, it isn't right to hold a grudge. We all make mistakes.

I told the other fellows my thoughts. After talking it over we went back to the Cap'n's door and yipped "good night" at him, just as though nothing had happened and everything was all right between us. It gave me a satisfied feeling to see his shoulders straighten. On the way home we told each other we would surprise him with a new log raft and possibly a pair of Sunday pants. Scoop said his pa had a lot of spare pants.

It was eleven o'clock when we got back to the tent. The house was in darkness. I had the feeling, though, that Mother and Dad were awake and heard us come into the yard. Mother's ears are pretty sharp when it comes to keeping track of me.

I was dead tired. My feet were like chunks of lead. There was a weariness in every muscle and corner of my body.

"Let's have one good night's sleep and forget

about the prowler," I suggested, when we were grouped in the lighted tent. "I'm just about all in," I added, flouncing onto one of the beds.

"Here, too," sighed Scoop, dropping down beside me.

"But suppose the prowler comes," hesitated Peg.

"Let it come," yawned Scoop, skinning out of his khaki shirt. "We can tie the tent flap on the inside," he added, "and hang a tin pan on a string so it will clatter to the floor if any one tries to get in."

That is what we did. And if the mysterious prowler visited us that night we knew nothing about it. When morning came the pan still hung on its string. I guess I never worked harder at sleeping in all my life. The fact that the four of us were crowded into two single beds didn't bother us. I guess we could have slept soundly packed in a tin can like sardines.

When I opened my eyes the brown hen was pecking at the white buttons on Peg's B.V.D.'s. This reminded me that I hadn't given it anything to eat since bringing it home. Dressing, I went into the house and got a box of rolled oats and some corn flakes. You should have seen it fill up.

Peg had breakfast with me. Following the morning meal we beat it down the alley to Red's house. It was our plan to lay low for a few days until Bill Hadley cooled off. We knew from experience that he would be pretty hot about the fake suicide. Bill is good at playing practical jokes on other people, but a thing he can't stand is to have some one get the laugh on him. We didn't want him to cuff our ears or lock us up in the cooler. So we decided it was safety first to keep out of his way.

Scoop came over at nine o'clock and we played tag in the barn. It was fun shinning around on the hayloft beams. Red told us not to open the door of his dove house because one of the doves might be setting and he didn't want it frightened from the nest.

Well, the morning carried through and nothing happened. That afternoon we ventured into the street. People we met looked at us and grinned. It was all over town about the fake suicide and our part in it. Everybody seemed to think it was a joke. There was considerable talk about the Princess. It seems she had opened a big checking account in the Tutter bank where Dad is a director and people said she was rich. Of course she wasn't a real Princess. We learned

that later. Princess de Mozobal was her professional name. When we got better acquainted with her we learned that she was born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and her real name was Miss Dorothy Pinkle. She told us we could call her Miss Dottie, like the circus people, but we liked best to call her the Princess.

Yes, we got pretty chummy with the Cap'n's new neighbor in the days that immediately followed. It was fun to go to her house. She knew a lot of bully good circus stories—how an elephant stomped on a wicked trainer and killed him and how a big South American snake got loose and scared a whole town into fits. We could always figure on something good to eat when we called on her. That was nice, too.

Well, to make it snappy and get to the end of my story, we were parked around a fudge plate in the Princess' kitchen one morning a few days after the fake suicide, when the kid who delivers telegrams knocked on the front door. The Princess signed for the message and tore open the yellow envelope.

"Well, I declare!" she said in an excited voice. "Ringling Brothers are sending a man here to sign me up. I wonder where they got my address. Probably through one of Colonel Swish-

er's people. Would you boys like to hear the telegram?"

"Sure," said Scoop, his eyes sparkling with eagerness.

This is what she read aloud to us:

New York City, New York.

Miss Dorothy Pinkle,
Tutter, Illinois.

Have just learned you are open for an engagement. We need beautiful fat lady for living statue feature act. Our Mr. Halley from Chicago office will call on you July eighteen with contract.

(Signed)
Office of General Manager,
Ringling Brothers.

"Why," said the Princess, with an excited gesture, "I know Mr. Halley personally. He used to be one of Ringling Brothers' advance agents a few years ago. And to-day is the eighteenth! Dear me! He may be in town this very minute."

"Hot dog!" yelled Scoop, pegging his cap at the ceiling. "Here's where we solve the mystery of the whispering trunk."

The Princess turned quickly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

Scoop told her the story of the escaped peril.

"I bet your Mr. Halley will know something about the Hindu," he concluded.

"We'll ask him," the Princess said.

Mr. Halley motored to Tutter that afternoon in the swellest red roadster I ever set eyes on. He and the Princess had a long talk in the parlor. Then she called us in from the garden.

I felt pretty proud as I shook hands with the showman. Here was a big business man. I could tell. It's easy to pick the truly big men from the pikers. Take Colonel Swisher. He looked like a piker.

"I've just told Mr. Halley," smiled the Princess, "that I've decided to retire for good. I'm too happy here in my little home to think of giving it up. I may buy the house from Mrs. Bowman. I like Tutter. Besides, I'm getting too thin for a fat lady act. I suspect I weigh less than two hundred pounds."

"Yes, boys," said the showman, "I'm out of luck. The Princess is so thin I hardly know her," and he winked at us in a chummy way.

Here the Princess turned to Scoop.

"Tell Mr. Halley about your waltzing hen," she laughed.

The showman straightened in his chair and stared.

"Waltzing hen——" he repeated.

Scoop started in at the beginning and told the whole story. When he concluded there was a lively sparkle in the man's eyes. He seemed awfully pleased.

"Maybe you recall the yellow man when he was with Ringling Brothers," said Scoop.

"I remember him well," said Mr. Halley. "In fact, I hired him."

"Do you know what he had in his trunk?" came eagerly from Scoop.

The man laughed.

"I'm quite sure it isn't a boy like you think."

"What is it?" said Scoop.

"Before I answer that," said the showman, "I'd like to have you bring me the yellow cat and the waltzing hen. Then we'll see if we can't locate your 'prowling peril,'" and he laughed some more.

Scoop stared.

"Did the waltzing hen belong to the yellow man?" he fumbled.

"The waltzing hen belongs to Ringling Brothers," said the man quietly. "It was stolen sev-

eral weeks ago and we have been unable to trace it."

Well, it didn't take us more than ten minutes to scoot across town and get the waltzing hen and the yellow cat.

"Fine," said Mr. Halley, when we tumbled into the white cottage. "Now if you will show me the way, we'll drive over to the barn where you have the doorknobs. You say you searched it, but I'm inclined to believe you overlooked something."

Arriving at Red's house we parked the car in Mr. Meyers' private drive and headed for the barn. I had the waltzing hen in my arms. Red carried the yellow cat.

"Well," grinned Mr. Halley, "who is the boy who plays the mouth organ?"

"Me," said Scoop, fishing in his pocket.

"All right, let's hear a lively waltz tune."

Scoop grinned and started in on the lost dog tune. Mr. Halley walked about the barn, acting like he was hunting for something.

"Where's Isadora?" he said. "Isadora must be here. Now I wonder where she is. Nice Isadora. Maybe Isadora will dance for us to-day."

Like I say I was holding the brown hen in my

arms. And the minute it heard the showman talking about Isadora it began to cluck and flop its wings.

"Isadora wants you to put her down," laughed Mr. Halley.

When the brown hen's feet touched the barn floor it started to whirl around and around in time to the music.

"Now," said Mr. Halley, "where's Peter? I'm sure we can't put on this act without Peter. Nice Peter. Where is Peter? Oh, Peter!"

The yellow cat jumped from Red's arms to the floor. "Meow!" it went, rubbing its furry sides against the showman's shoes.

"Do you want to get in on this act, Peter?" Mr. Halley inquired, bending down and stroking the furry back.

The cat seemed to know what the showman was saying. It set up just as cunning as anything and nodded its head "Yes." Just like it did that night in the hotel.

"All right," laughed the showman, patting it on the head. "You stand over here and I'll see if I can find Butta Butta. Oh, Butta, Butta!" he called. "Come, Butta Butta. Nice Butta Butta."

I stood there holding my breath. Who was Butta Butta? Was it some one hiding in the

barn? Then a shiver shot down my spine when I heard a sound above. A scratching sound.

Red was standing where he could look up the stairs.

"It's a little monkey," he screeched. "It's been hiding in my dove house."

Well, I guess that's all. Mr. Halley explained to us that the cat and hen and monkey comprised a performing group known as "The Happy Family." The cat played on a toy fiddle while the hen and the monkey waltzed together. The monkey, of course, was the "escaped peril" that visited us at night, stalking around and around the tent, only Scoop doesn't like to hear about it.

With Parkva dead, no one will ever know why he stole the waltzing hen and its performing companions. Maybe he was a bit loony on this Jainism business and got the crazy idea in his head that the hen and monkey and cat were three of his departed ancestors. Then, again, he may have intended selling "The Happy Family" to some other show for a lot of money.

We concluded that he gave us the daggery look because he was afraid we would talk to people about his whispering trunk and cause an investigation of its contents. The "whispering" Mose

heard was a sound made by one of the animals. Probably Butta Butta.

It was the knowledge that he was dying of heart failure that froze the look of terror on the Hindu's face. At least that is the way we have it figured out. I don't think he was frightened to death because the hen and its companions were escaping from the trunk. Doc Leland went on record in affirming that it was a plain case of heart failure. He ought to know.

And the white doorknob? Well, you'll have to ask Butta Butta about that the next time you attend Ringling Brothers' circus. But I guess all monkeys like to play tricks. Red Meyers does; and he's a monkey, kind of.

THE END

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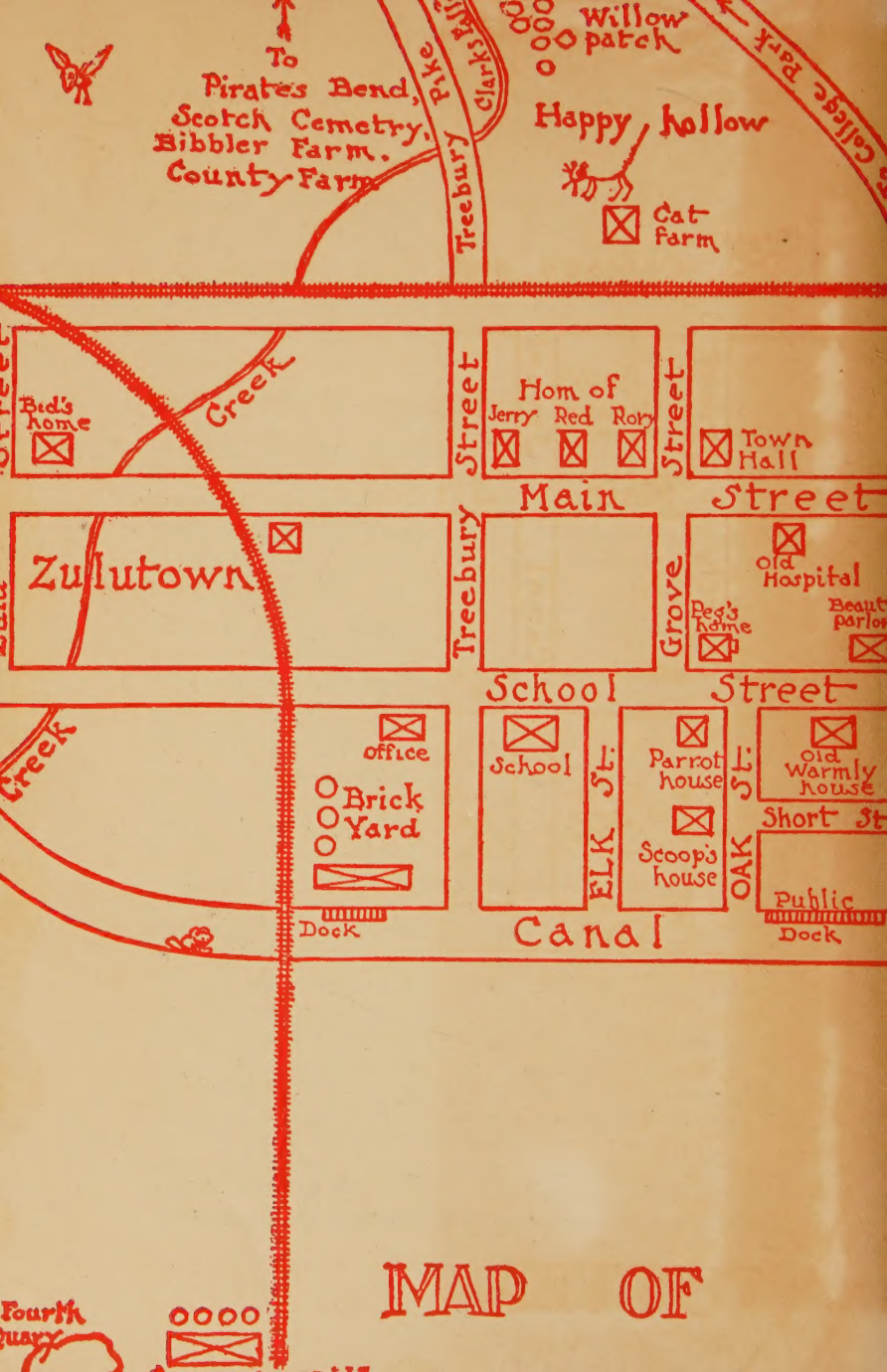
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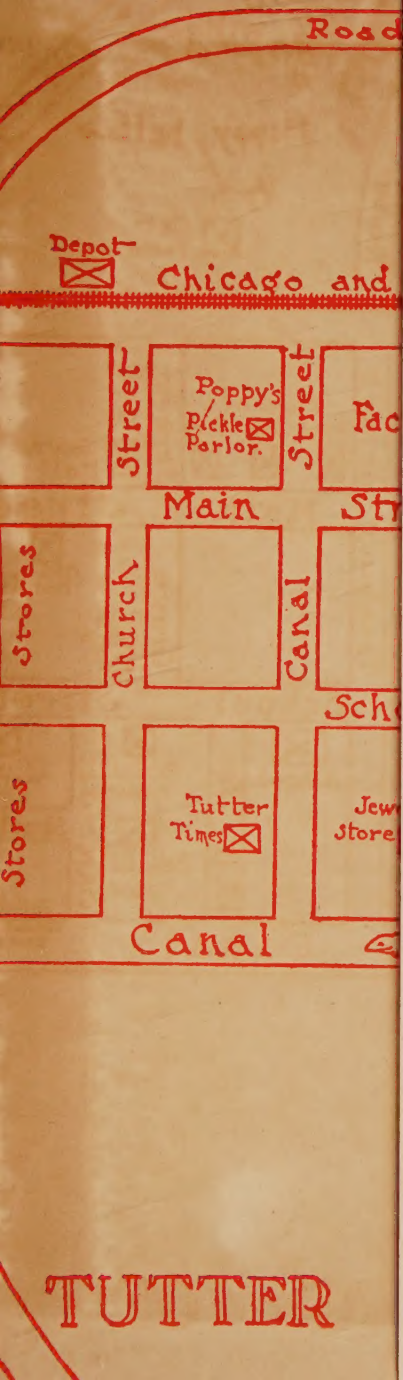

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